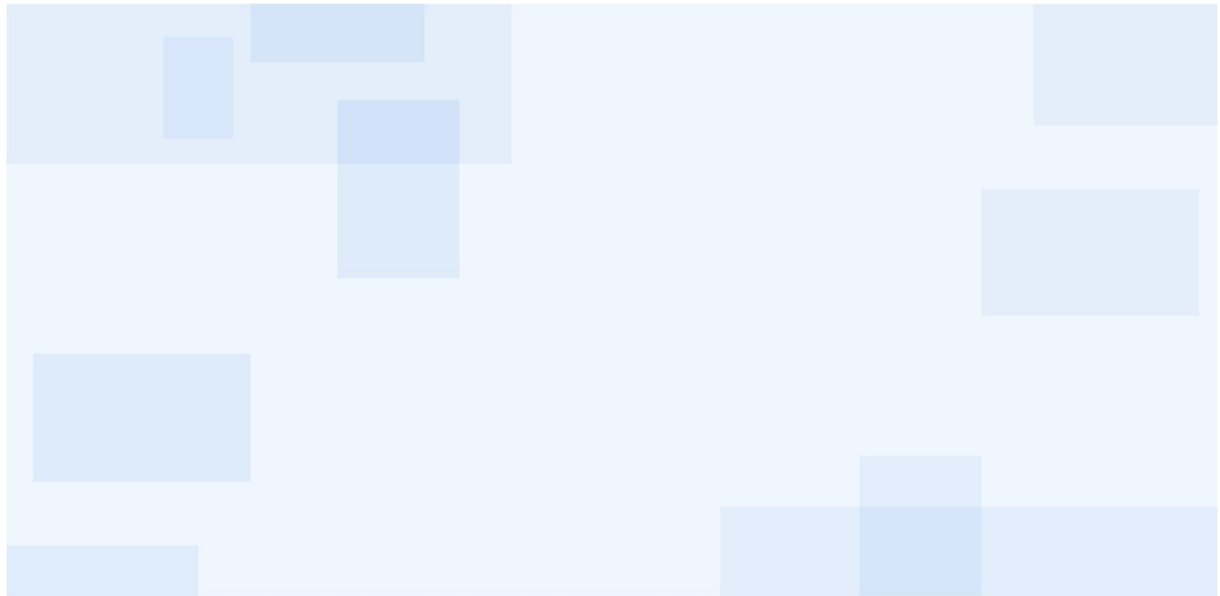


Working paper



RESILIENCE AND WARTIME TRANSFORMATION: TRUST, GEOPOLITICS, AND EU DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN UKRAINE



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WORKING PAPER

Resilience and wartime transformation: trust, geopolitics, and EU democracy promotion in Ukraine

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26 June 2026

SUMMARY

This report examines how the full-scale Russian invasion has reshaped Ukraine's hybrid governance equilibrium, drawing on an original survey of 572 Kyiv residents and elite interviews. While trust in domestic institutions remains low, horizontal trust is exceptionally high and has fuelled civic mobilisation defending anti-corruption bodies like NABU. The EU enjoys strong public legitimacy, yet this coexists with limited awareness of its concrete programmes, exposing a gap between the EU as a normative 'political horizon' and as an effective governance actor. The report argues that wartime has strengthened civic-democratic culture, but translating EU legitimacy into durable institutional ownership remains uncertain.



Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War democracy promotion has been a central component of the European Union's (EU) engagement with its eastern neighbourhood. Through instruments such as legislative alignment with EU standards, institutional reform programmes, anti-corruption initiatives, and governance assistance, the EU has sought to promote democratic institutions, rule of law, and accountable governance in neighbouring states aspiring closer ties with the Union.

The outcomes of these efforts have been uneven. Across the Eastern Neighbourhood, formal institutional convergence with European standards has often coexisted with persistent informal power structures, fluctuating institutional legitimacy, and uneven levels of trust (vertically as well as horizontal). Rather than representing transitional stages on a linear path toward consolidated democracy, political systems have stabilised as hybrid regimes in which democratic procedures coexist with informal networks of power and patronage. Ukraine represents a particularly interesting case in this broader regional pattern. Since independence in 1991, the country has experienced repeated cycles of political mobilisation, institutional reform, and elite contestation. Episodes such as the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Euromaidan protests in 2013–2014 demonstrated strong societal demand for accountable governance and closer alignment with European values and institutions. At the same time, patterns of patrimonial politics, fragmented institutional authority, and low levels of trust in political institutions have persisted, contributing to a durable configuration of hybrid governance that lasted until the Russian full-scale invasion of 2022. What has come instead is a country at war, a war economy and population that has rallied around defence against Russian aggression, but that also and we would say remarkably given that the country is at war, has taken to the streets to defend the autonomy of institutions as the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) against political attempts to constraint them through political interference. How this will evolve over time is an open question, but it is interesting to note that even amid daily Russian attacks ordinary people are also concerned with good governance and public accountability.

While the future of Ukraine and its path towards deeper democracy and increased accountability therefore still is uncertain, up until now these dynamics have produced a political system characterised by recurrent movements toward democratic reform followed by periods of institutional retrenchment. These

oscillations have recalibrated the balance between formal democratic institutions and informal networks of power without fundamentally resolving the tensions between them. As a result, Ukraine's political development until the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 can be understood as the evolution of a hybrid equilibrium shaped by the interaction between institutional reform, incumbent and extra-incumbent elite competition, foreign interferences and citizens' perceptions of political authority.

The full-scale Russian invasion represents a huge external shock to this equilibrium. The war and Ukraine's strong resistance is transforming the institutional governance apparatus and how it operates, while not yet having necessarily completely replaced underlying features of hybridity. However, it has reconfigured the relationship between state authority, social trust, and external engagement. Wartime mobilisation has generated unprecedented levels of societal cohesion and civic participation, while simultaneously altering the institutional conditions under which democratic reforms and external democracy promotion efforts are pursued.

These transformations raise important questions about the durability of Ukraine's long standing hybrid equilibrium. As the report will show, Ukrainians continues to distrust political parties, bureaucrats and most state institutions, but at the same time they trust each other. They display very high trust in relatives, kin, friends and neighbours. So, while in line with the literature on hybrid regimes, levels of vertical trust are low, but horizontal trust is high. It is high as this is where people seek support in a time of unprecedented crisis, but it represents more than that. The high horizontal trust is not only the very basis for Ukrainian resilience and resistances: the frontline holds because civilian life and production continues and *vice versa*, but at important decisive moments (see Bøås & Osland 2025) it has also spilled over to crucial exposures of a new civic democratic culture. We will illustrate this argument with the events of July and November 2025 as on both occasions we saw important civic mobilisation to demand accountability and transparency of the political leadership and the state apparatus. To what extent these decisive moments of expressions of a civic democratic culture will have a lasting reconfiguring impact on still existing informal practices of political authority remains an open question. It will depend on how long time the war continues and what type of peace that eventually ends the conflict as this more than anything else will constitute the foundations of post-war Ukraine. However, the EU and other external partners that during war has continued to support democratic procedures and practices in Ukraine should take some comfort in the fact that over four years of war has not weakened

civic democratic yearnings in Ukraine but rather strengthened them. This means that the public receptiveness for EU democracy promotion initiatives is high and this is a momentum that external partners like the EU needs to become better at building their programmes on and around.

This report examines these questions within the analytical framework of the Horizon Europe project EU RE-ENGAGE (See Bøås, Giske & Rieker 2024), which investigates how hybridity, social trust, and geopolitical representations influence democratic trajectories in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. Rather than treating democratic development as a purely institutional process, the project emphasises the social foundations of governance, focusing on how citizens' perceptions of institutions, external actors, and reform initiatives shape political outcomes. Drawing on original fieldwork data collected in Kyiv between September 2025 and April 2026, that included vignette-survey data collection, in-depth interviews, and project process-tracing of EU funded initiatives. The report uses these data to analyse three interconnected dimensions of Ukraine's political landscape. First, it examines patterns of vertical and horizontal trust and their implications for democratic governance. Second, it investigates how EU democracy promotion initiatives are perceived and mediated through domestic institutional and societal dynamics. Third, it explores how geopolitical imaginaries of external actors shape citizens' attitudes toward reform and international cooperation.

By situating the relative uniqueness of Ukraine within the broader comparative framework of hybrid regimes and democracy promotion, the report contributes to ongoing debates about democratic resilience and external engagement in the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

Analytical framework

We draw on the literature on hybridity and hybrid regimes to explore the evolution of political authority in Ukraine, but we also underscore how the theoretical framework needs to be thoroughly situated and contextualised in Ukraine's both ancient and contemporary historical trajectory. It is not possible to understand current displays of political authority, levels of trust and distrust (horizontal and vertical), and people's representations of geopolitical realities and preferences without taking these contextual factors into serious consideration. Context sensitivity is key both to understanding Ukraine and what sets it apart from the other countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood but should also be the guiding light

for external partners like the EU. Context sensitivity is regularly claimed by the EU's External Action Service and DG Near, but research has shown that it often exists more in policy statements than in effective programming (see Bøås & Rieker 2019). This is not only a challenge for the EU but for all external partners in Ukraine.

Understanding the evolution of governance in Ukraine requires an analytical movement beyond the linear expectations of democratic transition that dominated the post-Cold War period. Early 'transitology' approaches assumed that post socialist states would follow a gradual and largely irreversible trajectory toward consolidated liberal democracy (Carothers 2002; McFaul 2002; Dufy & Thiriot 2013). Political developments have since challenged this assumption. Rather than progressing steadily toward democratic consolidation, many political systems in the region have stabilised as hybrid regimes combining formal democratic institutions with persistent informal structures of power and Ukraine prior to the full-scale Russian invasion was not an exception.

Hybrid regimes are characterised by the coexistence of pluralist procedures and illiberal practices. As Morlino (2009) observes, they operate through 'ambiguous institutions, lacking one or more essential characteristics of democracy but also failing to acquire those that would make them fully authoritarian'. Over the past two decades, such systems have become increasingly widespread, reflecting what Lührmann & Lindberg (2019) describe as gradual declines in democratic attributes alongside the entrenchment of hybrid political orders. Rather than representing temporary transitional arrangements, these configurations have proven remarkably resilient. Hybridity should therefore be seen as a durable mode of governance that fuses formal institutions with informal networks of patronage, rent seeking, and personalised authority. These regimes oscillate between moments of reform and retrenchment, producing what Knott (2018) describes as a 'democratic–authoritarian dynamic equilibrium'. Political competition occurs within this equilibrium without fundamentally transforming the underlying logic of governance and recalibrating power among incumbents and challengers while preserving the hybrid structure itself. At the centre of this equilibrium lies the entanglement of formal and informal rule. Public institutions coexist with parallel structures of control operating through patron client relations, elite networks, and informal exchange. Bøås, Giske & Osland (2024) drawing on Reno (1995) conceptualise these dualities through the metaphors of the 'theatre state' and the 'shadow state'. The theatre state performs legality and accountability to maintain legitimacy, while the shadow state governs the actual distribution of resources and

loyalty through informal channels that extend from national power centres to peripheral municipalities. In such contexts, rent seeking, clientelism, and neopatrimonialism are not aberrations but core mechanisms through which hybrid regimes reproduce themselves. The several cases of high-level cases of corruption revealed lately in Ukraine shows that this is an important aspect of politics even after the full-scale invasion, but the exposure also shows that there are public institutions that fight not only corruption but the perverted version of governance that they represents and that these public institutions are supported and sought to be protected by important segments of the population.

The durability of hybrid governance is closely connected to its social foundations. In particular, the distribution of trust plays a crucial role in shaping political stability and democratic resilience. Vertical trust refers to citizens' confidence in governmental institutions and political leaders, while horizontal trust captures the interpersonal and inter group relations that underpin social cohesion (Bøås, Giske & Osland 2024). Persistent deficits in either dimension weaken accountability and encourage reliance on informal instruments of control. Where vertical trust is low, rulers substitute legitimacy with patronage; where horizontal trust erodes, societies fragment into enclaves of selective solidarity that struggle to coordinate collective action for reform. Democratic resilience therefore depends not only on institutional continuity but also on the societal capacity to 'bounce back from autocratisation' (Boese et al. 2021). These internal dynamics also shape the permeability of hybrid regimes to external influence. The literature on linkage and leverage developed by Levitsky & Way (2005, 2010) provides an important framework for understanding this interaction. Linkage refers to the density of economic, social, and informational ties connecting a country to external actors, while leverage captures the capacity of those actors to exercise influence through coercion, dependency, or conditional incentives. In the post-Cold War period, strong Western linkage and leverage often supported democratic diffusion. However, the contemporary geopolitical environment is characterised by the presence of multiple competing external actors, producing what can be described as overlapping or competing forms of external influence.

In this context, several external powers may act in ways that sustain authoritarian tendencies rather than democratic reform (Levitsky & Way 2010: 41). Russia, but also China, and Turkey have been identified in this role, providing financial patronage, strategic investment, information operations, or exploiting energy and trade dependencies to expand their influence (Ambrosio 2009; Tolstrup 2009, 2014,

2015). Such engagement often operates through informal channels that mirror the domestic structures of hybrid regimes. As Tolstrup (2013) argues, the effectiveness of foreign leverage depends on the receptivity of domestic elites who control access to resources and decision making. Hybrid governance environments are particularly receptive to such interference. The prevalence of clientelist networks and rent distribution creates multiple entry points through which foreign actors can embed themselves in domestic political economies. External influence therefore rarely operates independently of domestic structures. Instead, it becomes intertwined with existing patronal networks that transform foreign resources into instruments of internal political competition. The interaction between hybridity and external interference thus generates a mutually reinforcing dynamic in which low trust, concentrated patronage, and foreign leverage reproduce one another.

These dynamics present a major challenge for the EU's democracy promotion efforts in the region. Traditional models of EU engagement based on conditionality, linkage, and governance assistance assumed that institutional alignment with European standards would gradually translate into democratic consolidation (Freyburg et al 2015; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig 2013). Yet in hybrid regimes these strategies have often produced more ambiguous outcomes. Entrenched informal networks and low levels of social trust frequently allow domestic elites to mimic compliance with EU requirements while preserving underlying patronal structures. Under such conditions, conditionality can inadvertently reinforce what Richter & Wunsch (2019) describe as 'stabilitocracies' rather than fostering substantive democratic transformation. In response to these limitations, the RE-ENGAGE framework draws on the embedded democracy model, which reconceptualises enlargement and democracy promotion as processes aimed at strengthening societal and institutional resilience. This perspective emphasises the interaction between formal and informal institutions as well as the levels of vertical and horizontal trust within society (Inglehart 1988; Croissant & Lott 2024). Rather than relying exclusively on top-down conditionality, democracy promotion must also address the social foundations of governance by supporting civic participation, independent media, and local accountability structures.

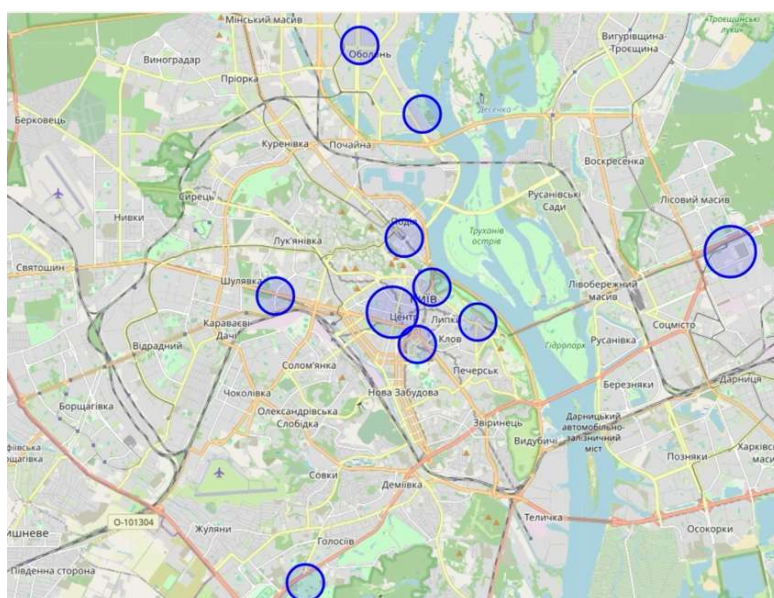
From this perspective, the effectiveness of EU engagement depends not only on formal institutional convergence but also on the capacity of societies to resist authoritarian influence and sustain democratic practices. In regions characterised by entrenched hybridity and geopolitical competition, enlargement thus becomes

less a linear process of institutional alignment than a long-term strategy for strengthening democratic resilience across the EU's neighbourhood.

Before we proceed to present data and discuss their ramifications for Ukraine and its key external interlocutors as the EU, we need to briefly explain the vignette survey methodology utilised. As far as we have been able to establish these data also represents the first larger survey conducted face-to-face in Ukraine since the Russian full-scale invasion. This means that these data are unique. The reason for this is that face-to-face survey interviews remove two biases that can occur during survey interviews conducted over the phone or through online platforms. First, when the interview is done face-to-face, we can be certain that the interviewee belongs to the sample. This cannot be completely verified if the interview is done over phone or on an online platform as one cannot with certainty verify that the one talked to is the same as the person sampled. Secondly, face-to-face interviews also allows the interviewer eye contact with the respondent, and the interviewer is therefore much better placed to detect if the respondent does not understand the question asked or loses concentration or interest in the questions and just starts to answer rapidly to be done with the interview.

The vignette-survey was implemented in Kyiv. Quota sampling in Kyiv based on male and female, age in the spans of 18-29, 30-54 and 55+ with a total number of respondents of 572 people interviewed. The interviews were conducted in randomised, designated locations (see map) with quotas randomly assigned across the 'pinpoints'.

Map 1. Vignette survey locations in Kyiv.



The interviews were conducted by a group of MA students who were trained by NUPI researchers in Kyiv. NUPI researchers were also present in Kyiv during the first days of data collection and monitored the process thereafter online with frequent meetings and conversations with the Ukraine research team. The programme used for the data collection CSPro and CSentry has been developed by the U.S. Bureau of Census and can be freely downloaded. It was installed on the interviewers' phone and computed to only work in the designated locations, and it also allowed real time monitoring of interviews conducted. This was done to quickly offer guidance and supervision. We were deeply impressed with the MA student interviewers who worked effectively and with a strong work ethic under challenging circumstances with daily Russian drone and missile attacks. The survey was a combination of ordinary survey with a vignette section attached to it where respondents were confronted with a fictional, but plausible narrative of possible peace negotiations and asked to report their trust in various mediator alternatives (see Appendix 1).

Democracy promotion, social trust and cohesion

An empirical examination of trust patterns in wartime Ukraine reveals a hierarchised architecture in which different actors (military, interpersonal, external, civic, and political) occupy distinct positions reflecting citizens' assessments of reliability, proximity, and accountability. The data does not point to a simple wartime rally-around-the-flag effect. Rather, it shows a differentiated landscape in which trust is selective and conditional, with domestic political institutions consistently at the bottom of the hierarchy. This matters for the analysis of democracy promotion because it means that EU-supported reforms are received not in a context of consolidated vertical legitimacy, but in a setting where some actors are credible precisely because the state is not. Understanding this architecture, who is trusted, why, and on what basis, is the necessary starting point for assessing how external democratic assistance operates and where its limits lie. The survey data that we have are instructive in this regard and we utilise them throughout the report. Below we present some of the most important ones as figures to offer the readers an initial overview of our data, but please note that all survey data utilised in this report stem from the vignette-survey exercise described above.

Figure 1. How the respondents report trust

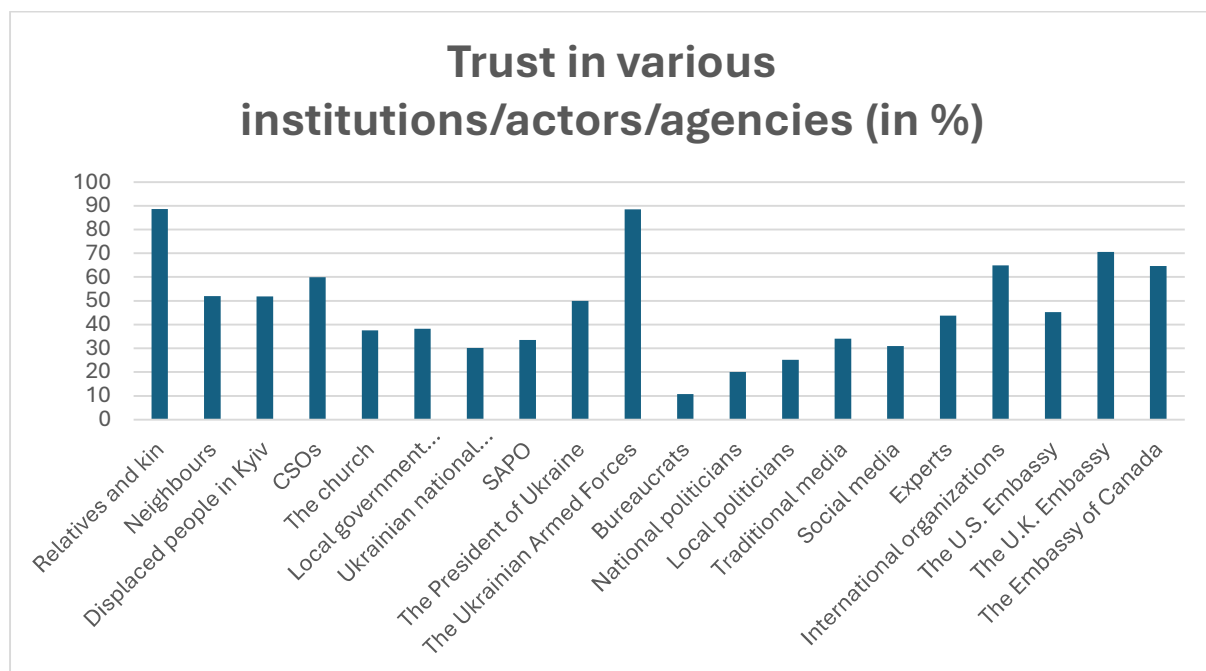


Figure 2. Public service satisfaction

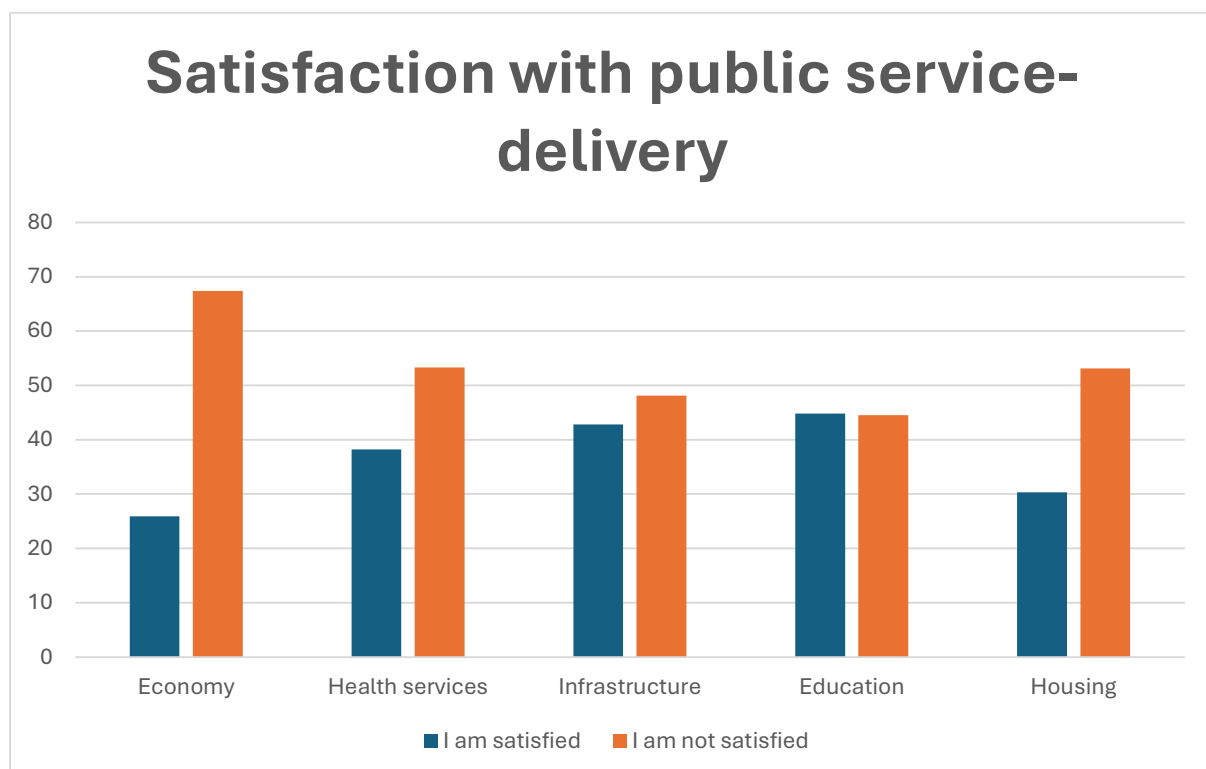
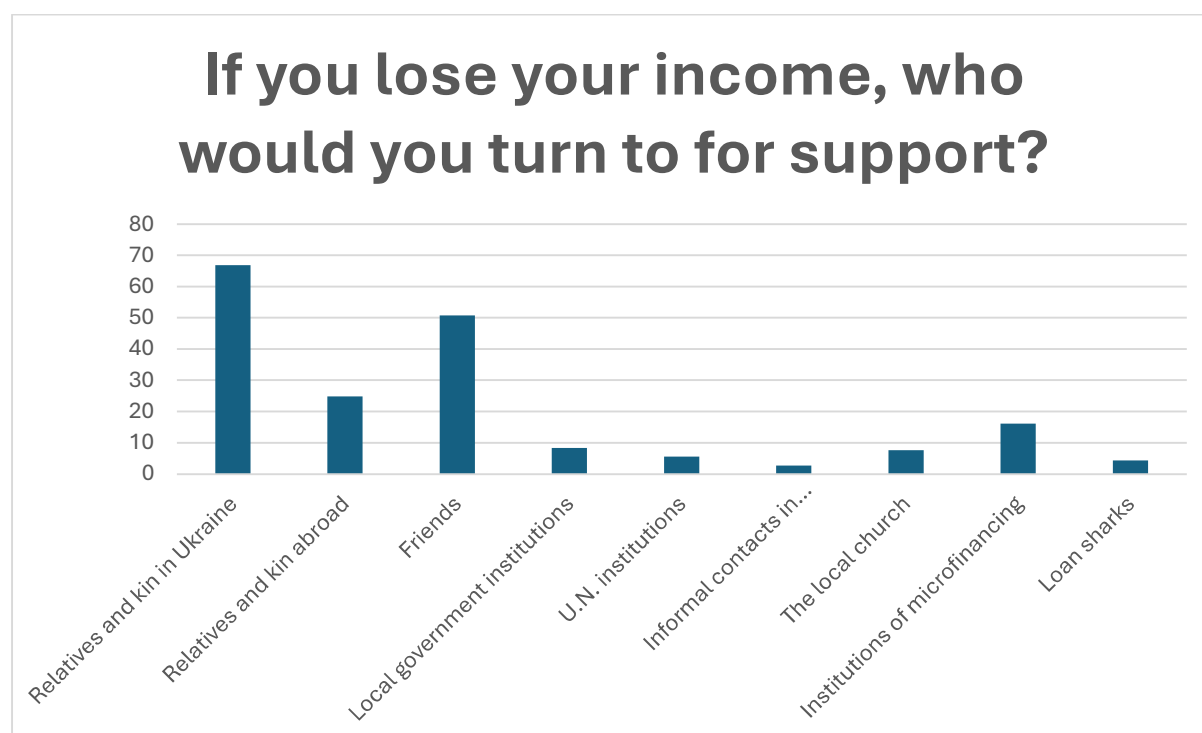


Figure 3. Loss of income, who to turn to?



The trust hierarchy: armed forces, kinship, and the external anchor

The most trusted actor in the survey is the Armed Forces of Ukraine, with 90.4 per cent of respondents expressing trust. This result is not simply a product of wartime solidarity, though solidarity is part of it. In Ukrainian public discourse, the Armed Forces have come to embody collective endurance and the defence of sovereignty itself, occupying a symbolic position that goes well beyond their institutional function. The gap between military trust and political trust is not a wartime specificity, it is a structural feature of Ukrainian public life that predates 2022 and that the invasion has deepened. Relatives and kin follow at 88.6 per cent. Under prolonged crisis, proximate interpersonal relations remain among the most reliable foundations of social order, and the survey data makes this concrete. When asked who they would turn to in the event of income loss, 68.9 per cent of respondents name relatives in Ukraine and 50.9 per cent name friends, while only 8.5 per cent would turn to local government. Social insurance in wartime Ukraine is overwhelmingly embedded in personal networks rather than mediated through public institutions. Even in criminal victimisation, where 71.1 per cent say they would turn to the police, 42.6 per cent would also turn to family. Formal and

informal repertoires of protection coexist; public authority and citizen-to-citizen solidarity are combined in practice rather than substituting for one another.

External actors occupy a distinctively high position in the trust hierarchy, consistently above most domestic institutions. The UK is trusted by 71.1 per cent, Canada by 65.3 per cent, and international organisations including the EU by 63.8 per cent. The US registers noticeably lower at 43.6 per cent, a gap that is not incidental and that the interview material explains directly. A NABU officer is matter of fact about the shift: ‘for 2014 to 2024, US support was around 92 million, EU support around 23 million... but the situation has changed since 2025 when the shutdown started. Now I would say EUACI is the major donor for us’. Citizens, like institutional actors, are tracking reliability as a practical criterion. The actors who maintained consistent support are more trusted than those who conditioned or withdrew it. This externally anchored dimension of legitimacy is one of the defining structural features of the Ukrainian case: the EU functions not only as a normative model but as a referential point of credibility in a landscape where the state itself cannot fully supply that credibility. As the representative of the EU delegation in Kyiv observes, EU investment in anti-corruption institutions has become politically legible at the citizen level in ways that go beyond project outputs: ‘people were also in the streets fighting for it (...) it’s a clear message that those institutions that are reformed are trusted by the Ukrainian society and that, at the end of the day, is enhancing the social cohesion of the country’.

Civil society organisations come in at 61.3 per cent trust, consistent with the broad role played by NGOs since 2014 in fields ranging from humanitarian assistance to anti-corruption monitoring. A representative from the EUACI describes how EUACI deliberately positions itself within this ecosystem: ‘we want to be a platform for interactions between civil society, anti-corruption institutions, and governing partners’. The placement of civic actors as intermediaries rather than peripheral recipients reflects the recognition that in a hybrid regime, civil society carries a form of delegated credibility that formal institutions cannot generate on their own. Trust in neighbours stands at 51 per cent and trust in internally displaced persons at 50.2 per cent. These figures are notable because in many conflict-affected settings, displacement generates tensions linked to housing, employment, and public services. The fact that trust in IDPs holds at around 50 per cent in Kyiv suggests that shared identification and wartime solidarity are mitigating cleavages that might otherwise emerge more sharply. A significant minority, around one third, still expresses distrust toward neighbours, and a substantial share chose ‘don't know’

regarding IDPs, so this solidarity is not uniform. Still, the overall pattern is one in which society remains more credible to itself than political elites do.

This matters analytically beyond its descriptive value. Horizontal trust in Ukraine is not merely a cohesion indicator, it is a structural resource for political mobilisation, and the historical record demonstrates this with unusual clarity. The pattern has deep roots. As Channell-Justice (2022) observes in her ethnographic account of the Euromaidan, the protests did not originate in organised political structures or formal institutional channels. They were sustained and expanded through the same dense networks of interpersonal and civic solidarity that the survey captures. When riot police beat students on Maidan in November 2013, ‘people came out in great numbers because state actors had crossed a line’, and they stayed, organised, and fed one another through precisely the kind of horizontal civic ties that show up in the trust data. What Channell-Justice identifies as Ukraine’s culture of self-organisation, ‘if something needs to be done, and someone has the ability to do it, they should simply do it’, is not a political philosophy but a social practice, transmitted through networks of mutual obligation and reproduced across successive episodes of mobilisation. Crucially, she notes that Ukrainians were so effective in their civic response to the 2022 invasion partly ‘because this isn’t the first time they’ve done it’: the networks, the organisational knowledge, and the interpersonal trust that sustained the 2022 response had already been built and tested in 2014.

This accumulation of civic capacity is documented from the other direction in Cooper, Gueudet Kostenko & Prokhorova’s (forthcoming) study of humanitarian activist networks conducting evacuations from Russian-occupied territories. Drawing on the concept of ‘civicness’, individual behaviours and collective actions that contribute to a public good through some form of mutual obligation or social contract, they show how post-Maidan civic networks have continued to operate in the most extreme conditions, organising evacuations of tens of thousands of people through informal trust-based channels that the state cannot replicate. As Fedirko (forthcoming) also observes volunteers ‘project their anti-statist identity through claims to being autonomous from institutionalised actors and more impactful than centralised bureaucracies, and this identity enables them to raise resources and coordinate aid in a society where wealthy middle classes harbour deep distrust of the state’. What makes this analytically significant for the trust data is the mechanism it reveals: frustration with and distrust of the state did not produce apathy; it

produced a drive for civic self-sufficiency grounded in high interpersonal trust at the citizen-to-citizen level.

The Ukrainian anti-corruption architecture rests on three specialised bodies established between 2014 and 2015. These are the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU), the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), and the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP) — complemented since 2019 by the High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC)¹. The institutional design allows for a functional separation of powers: NACP executes monitoring and prevents, NABU investigates, SAPO prosecutes, and the HACC adjudicates.

On 22 July 2025, however, the Verkhovna Rada adopted Draft Law No. 12414 in the second reading, which amended the Criminal Procedure Code of Ukraine. The bill had originally been introduced in January 2025 to regulate pre-trial investigations into the disappearance of persons in front-line areas. However, before the second reading, amendments were introduced that substantially restructured Ukraine's anti-corruption architecture by transferring core competences of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau and the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office to the Prosecutor General²³⁴. For example, the Prosecutor General acquired authority to reassign cases and materials away from NABU and received the exclusive competence to issue notices of suspicion against Category 'A' officials. The amended bill⁵ passed with 263 votes in favour and was signed into law by President Volodymyr Zelensky the same evening.

¹ See Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. 2014. *Law of Ukraine "On the Prosecutor's Office"* [Zakon Ukrainy "Pro prokuraturu"], 14 October 2014, No. 1697-VII. *Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy* 2015, no. 2–3, art. 12 <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1697-18#Text>. Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. 2014. *Law of Ukraine "On the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine"* [Zakon Ukrainy "Pro Natsionalne antykoruptsiine biuro Ukrainy"], 14 October 2014, No. 1698-VII. *Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy* 2014, no. 47, art. 2051. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1698-18#Text>. Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. 2014. *Law of Ukraine "On Prevention of Corruption"* [Zakon Ukrainy "Pro zapobihannia koruptsii"], 14 October 2014, No. 1700-VII. *Vidomosti Verkhovnoi Rady Ukrainy* 2014, no. 49, art. 2056. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1700-18#Text>.

² The Prosecutor General is appointed to the position by the President of Ukraine with the consent of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.

³ Transparency International Ukraine, *Stripping NABU and SAPO of Independence: Legal Analysis of Amendments to Draft Law No. 12414* (23 July 2025), available at <https://ti-ulvivkraine.org/en/news/stripping-nabu-and-sapo-of-independence-legal-analysis-of-amendments-to-draft-law-no-12414-2/>.

⁴ The legislative sequence was preceded by SBU-led searches at NABU premises, investigating NABU employees on traffic-violation grounds. Jointly, the two situations were perceived by society as coordinated actions to limit the agency of anti-corruption bodies.

⁵ In respect of Art. 116, Rules of Procedure of the Parliament of Ukraine, proposals and amendments to a draft law that is being prepared for the second reading may be made only to the text of the draft law (sections, chapters, articles, their parts, items, subitems, paragraphs, sentences) that was adopted by the Verkhovna Rada as the basis.

In response, mass street protests, including predominantly youth, erupted on the evening of 22 July and intensified through the following days.⁶ Demonstrations were held in Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa, Dnipro, and frontline cities including Kharkiv and Sumy. The mobilisation acquired the name Cardboard Revolution (aka *Картонкові протести* (Cardboard Protests), or *Картонковий майдан* (Cardboard Maidan) on account of the handmade cardboard placards that became their defining visual register.⁷ The legislative initiative also caught the attention of Brussels: the European Commission expressed deep concern about Ukraine's adoption of amendments, and Ursula Von der Leyen contacted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky directly on the issue.⁸

On 23 July, President Zelensky announced that he would submit a corrective bill; on 24 July, Draft Law No. 13533 was introduced, repealing the contested provisions and restoring NABU's investigative jurisdiction and SAPO's procedural autonomy. On 31 July, the Verkhovna Rada adopted the corrective law in two consecutive readings, and Zelensky signed the law the same day. The July 2025 mobilisation was rapidly instrumentalised by Russian state media and pro-Russian information operations. The demonstrations were framed as evidence of a fatal political crisis and an externally orchestrated protest.⁹ However, not only did the protest reach its goal, but it also confirmed the operative capacity of Ukraine's horizontal civic networks to mobilize rapidly in defence of democratic institutions.

The July 2025 protests therefore followed the pattern we discussed above. When Law 12414 threatened the independence of NABU and SAPO, the mobilisation that followed did not wait for institutional coordination or political party organisation. It drew on the same horizontal networks of students, NGO activists, alumni, and volunteers, the same social infrastructure that had activated in 2004, 2013, and 2014. Channell-Justice's observation about Euromaidan applies directly: 'people came out in great numbers because state actors had crossed a line'. The line crossed in July 2025 was different, but the social mechanism was the same. This is the

⁶ Street rallies are formally restricted under martial law. See Yuliya Fil, *Картонковий майдан: боротьба за майбутнє України*, *PostPravda* (28 July 2025), available at <https://postpravda.info/uk/pravda/svoboda-slova/kartonowy-majdan-przyszlosc-ukrainy-ukr/>.

⁷ *Idem*.

⁸ Polskie Radio. 'У ЄС стурбовані обмеженням незалежності НАБУ й САП і застерігають Київ' [The EU Is Concerned by the Limitation of NABU and SAP Independence and Warns Kyiv]. July 2025. <https://www.polskieradio.pl/398/7856/Artykul/3555348>.

⁹ Ukrainian Association of Professional Photographers, 'Pure young protest': How Ukrainian photo documentarians refute Russian propaganda about the protests of the summer of 2025, available at <https://www.ukrainianphotographers.com/en/uni-story/pure-young-protest>, drawing on monitoring by the Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine (Служба зовнішньої розвідки України, СЗРУ).

capacity that Boese et al. (2021) describe as the ability to ‘bounce back from autocratisation’, and in Ukraine it has been activated repeatedly, across different political conjunctures, with sufficient force to arrest or reverse democratic backsliding. That this capacity exists, has proven durable, and is rooted in a form of horizontal trust that the survey continues to register at significant levels is one of the most consequential findings of the trust data, and one that distinguishes Ukraine sharply from hybrid regime cases where low horizontal trust has left democratic institutions without a social base to defend them.

Domestic institutions: a landscape of distrust

By contrast, trust in domestic political institutions remains low and, in most cases, decisively negative. National government is trusted by only 30.6 per cent while 54.5 per cent express distrust. Local government performs somewhat better at 37.7 per cent trust but still attracts more distrust than trust, a result that only partially confirms the hypothesis, tested across other country cases in this project, that legitimacy is higher at the sub-national level. Individual politicians deepen the pattern: local politicians are trusted by 22.8 per cent, national politicians by 19.6 per cent, and bureaucrats by only 10.4 per cent, with 74 per cent expressing distrust toward them. The presidency occupies a distinct intermediate position, with 50.2 per cent trust and 39.4 per cent distrust, a result that most likely reflects personalised evaluations of Zelensky rather than confidence in the presidency as an institution.

Satisfaction with government service delivery reinforces this picture and sharpens its relevance for EU programming. In the domain of rule of law, only 2.1 per cent of respondents say they are very satisfied and 15.6 per cent satisfied, a combined figure of 17.7 per cent, against 71.2 per cent dissatisfied. Economic governance fares similarly: 1.9 per cent very satisfied and 20.6 per cent satisfied (22.5 per cent combined), against 71.9 per cent dissatisfied. Other sectors perform somewhat better: infrastructure reaches a combined 42.4 per cent satisfaction, education 42.8 per cent, security 41.8 per cent. But rule of law and the economy represent the domains where the gap between institutional promises and lived experience is most acute, and these are precisely the fields where EU democracy promotion is most concentrated. The EU's reform agenda therefore operates under the most demanding conditions of public disillusionment, in sectors where citizens have the most reason to be sceptical and the least experience of improvement.

The Pravo-Justice representative articulates the implementation gap from inside the project: ‘you can have the most well-crafted legislation, but how it gets

implemented on the ground is a completely different story. There's also this persistent gap between the centre and the regions'. Legislative reform, however, technically sound, does not automatically translate into citizens' perceptions of institutional quality, and the distance between formal progress and experiential reality is a recurring feature of the Ukrainian reform trajectory. Part of the explanation lies in structural features of institutional design that go beyond political will. The Pravo-Justice representative identifies a specific problem in the judicial governance architecture: 'in Ukraine, there are way too many judicial self-governing bodies. Their powers are blurred and overlapping. This setup makes it easy for everyone to avoid responsibility by pointing fingers at others. An anonymous interviewee identifies a parallel bottleneck at the ministerial level: the concentration of both EU integration responsibilities and the Ministry of Justice portfolio in a single minister has had 'a negative impact, primarily on the Ministry itself (...) many issues that are supposed to be addressed through her remain unresolved. There are simply physical limits to how much one person can handle, including time constraints'. Reform resistance in Ukraine is therefore not only a matter of political will at the top but also built into institutional designs that diffuse accountability and make coordination structurally difficult.

Anti-corruption bodies: selective pockets of legitimacy

Within this generally weak field, anti-corruption bodies occupy a distinctive intermediate position. SAPO, included in the surveys to account for the anti-corruption infrastructure more broadly, records 34.3 per cent trust. In absolute terms this is far from overwhelming, but in relative terms it places SAPO above most public institutions and near the Church (36.2 per cent) and the media (32.3 per cent). This pattern is consistent with what the hybrid regime literature describes as asymmetric credibility: targeted institutional reforms can generate selective pockets of legitimacy within an otherwise distrusted governance without those gains accumulating into broader systemic legitimacy (Mazepus et al. 2016).

The interviews reveal the texture of this legitimacy in ways the survey cannot. The representative from the EUACI describes how the accountability landscape has shifted since the Maidan: 'before the Maidan, you had a group of officials that were somehow above it all, ministers, MPs, heads of state-owned enterprises, judges, very seldom had cases come to court. That has changed completely'. The numbers bear this out. Ukraine has moved from 144th on the Corruption Perceptions Index in 2013 to 104th today, and the share of citizens reporting a bribe paid in the last twelve months has dropped from over 70 per cent in 2013 to below 20 per cent. As The

representative from the EUACI puts it: 'we don't see that as a result of more people being corrupt, but more as a result of cleaning up and anti-corruption institutions becoming more effective'. Today the High Anti-Corruption Court has delivered verdicts in more than 400 cases, with over 175 prison sentences. Ministers, a president of the Supreme Court, a deputy prime minister, and numerous judges have faced investigation. These are real and substantial changes.

Yet the institutions that produced these results remain fragile and contested. The NABU officer describes the July 2025 crisis without euphemism: 'everything collapsed in July (...) we were busy with the things, how to stay alive'. This was not the first time. The NABU officer traces a sequence of crises: 'we had crisis in 2017 and 2019. We had a constitutional court decision five years ago. So, all of that was very painful. And we stayed alive. I always say thankful to the international partners'. The July 2025 attempt to curtail NABU and SAPO's independence through Law 12414 is therefore best understood not as an exceptional event but as the latest iteration of a recurring pattern in which the anti-corruption architecture is periodically attacked by the political forces whose interests it threatens.

The public response to that attack is analytically significant. The July protests mobilised students, NGO activists, alumni, and volunteers, many of them fully aware of the limitations of the institutions they were defending. What drove them was not confidence in institutional performance but the recognition of anti-corruption bodies as necessary democratic counterweights, whose subordination to political power would further weaken an already fragile accountability order. In that sense the protests expressed democratic judgement rather than institutional trust: the recognition that imperfect institutions may still be preferable to their capture or dismantling.

The NABU officer's own formulation captures the dual structure of anti-corruption institutions' resilience: 'The crisis in July showed that we stayed alive because of two things. First, the civil society and the support of people on the streets (...) and the second is the international partners'. These bodies are embedded within a broader protective coalition of civic mobilisation and external backing that lends them resilience independently of their formal trust scores. But the NABU officer also introduces a layer of caution that any assessment of programme impact must take seriously: 'I don't want international partners to be fooled by Ukrainians (...) sometimes we are said one thing and done a different thing. You cannot be played by our government'. This warning, from within the reform ecosystem itself, about selective compliance and performative reformism is not incidental. It identifies a

structural risk in the very reliance on external legitimacy that has allowed anti-corruption institutions to survive, the risk that the theatre of reform, in the terms of Bøås, Giske & Osland (2024), substitutes for its substance.

Reform gains, trust deficits

The coexistence of targeted reform gains and continued systemic dissatisfaction points to a recurring disjuncture in the Ukrainian case. Sector-specific credibility gains in anti-corruption and judicial reform have not repaired the wider legitimacy deficit of the state. Citizens who may abstractly acknowledge reform progress nonetheless remain overwhelmingly dissatisfied with governance in the domains most directly affected, a judgement confirmed in real time by the scale of the November 2025 energy sector corruption scandal, which involved top government officials when this report was being written. Asymmetric credibility does not accumulate into systemic legitimacy, and individual institutional improvements leave the hybrid equilibrium largely intact.

At the local level, the Mykolaiv Integrity City experience offers a partial counterpoint. A representative from the Mykolaiv Municipality describes the programme's foundational design principle: 'always the result of the project is a really changed process that is recorded in all normative documents, and which takes place without the introduction of the programme'. The results of this approach are concrete and measurable: procurement reform doubled competition in capital construction management; over 10 million UAH was saved at Vodokanal in two quarters alone through improved purchasing procedures; updated regulatory rules for advertising constructions generated over 7 million UAH in additional city revenue; a satellite-linked damage monitoring system now feeds strategic reconstruction planning; and Mykolaiv was ranked the most transparent city among frontline cities and seventh overall in Ukraine's Transparent Cities index. These outcomes represent real institutional change, not outputs delivered and then abandoned but practices embedded in city council decisions that continue independently of the programme.

Yet even the representative from the Mykolaiv Municipality acknowledges the visibility limits of this model: 'such soft projects, it's difficult to feel on yourself (...) the real result will be visible through two or three years'. The supervisory boards established on Mykolaiv's communal enterprises, the internal audit functions introduced, the corporate governance reforms underway, these will translate into better utility services and more efficient city management, but the causal chain

between project intervention and lived experience is long and not immediately legible to citizens. As The representative from the EUACI notes, describing EUACI's ambition to function as both a capacity-building programme and an analytical resource for the EU Delegation, the interface between institutional reform and societal perception is not automatic. It requires the kind of long-term local presence and sustained civic communication that few programme cycles make possible.

This is confirmed starkly by the survey data. Most respondents, 57.6 per cent, report no awareness of any local CSO activities aimed at building trust. Awareness of specific EU-funded programmes remains low: only 9.9 per cent have heard of Pravo-Justice and 28.1 per cent of EUACI. These figures do not mean the programmes are without effect, the institutional and procedural changes documented in the interview material are real and, in several cases, have already been replicated or codified in national legislation. But they do indicate that these effects are not being credited at the citizen level. Institutional reforms can have tangible governance consequences without generating recognisable political credit, and the gap between what programmes achieve and what citizens perceive is not merely a communication problem. It is a structural feature of how technical democracy promotion operates in a hybrid regime: through institutional channels that are, by design, at a remove from the everyday experience of the citizens whose trust they are ultimately meant to build.

This structural feature, citizens who trust the EU as a political horizon while remaining largely unaware of what EU-funded programmes have concretely changed in their institutional environment, connects the findings of this section directly to the questions that the section on *Perceptions of the EU* pursues. The EU's privileged position in Ukrainian public opinion is real and significant, but its basis is not primarily experiential, it needs understanding the structure and limits of that geopolitical trust, and what it does and does not make possible for democracy promotion.

Geopolitical representations and preferences

The previous section established that the trust architecture in wartime Ukraine is characterised by a distinctive displacement: external actors are more credible than most domestic political institutions, and civic networks sustain democratic resilience in the absence of consolidated institutional legitimacy. This section asks what the structure of citizens' geopolitical preferences reveals about the dynamics

of linkage, leverage, and external influence in a hybrid regime (Levitsky & Way 2006), and what implications these dynamics carry for the EU's democracy promotion strategy. The question is not simply which actors are preferred, the survey and vignette data answer that clearly enough, but what the ordering and texture of those preferences tell us about how hybridity mediates the reception of external engagement, and where the EU's unusually strong geopolitical legitimacy reaches and where it does not.

Geopolitical trust as a function of reliability, not ideology

From the vignette surveys, it turns out that citizens' preferences among external actors are structured primarily by perceived reliability under conditions of existential threat rather than by abstract ideological alignment with democratic values. The actors most trusted in the general survey, the United Kingdom (71.1 per cent), Canada (65.3 per cent), and the EU (63.8 per cent), are precisely those that have maintained consistent and unconditional support for Ukraine since the full-scale invasion. The US, trusted by 43.6 per cent, falls noticeably below these partners. This gap is not incidental. It reflects the Trump administration's demonstrated willingness to condition support and its partial withdrawal from Ukraine's external aid architecture. The NABU officer tracks the material consequences with precision and notes that between 2014 and 2024 US support to NABU amounted to approximately 92 million dollars against around 23 million from the EU, adding that following the 2025 USAID shutdown, 'now I would say EUACI is the major donor for us'. The observation is significant beyond its financial dimension. The shift in donor primacy has reshuffled the entire hierarchy of external legitimacy that Ukraine's reform institutions depend on. Citizens, like institutional actors, are tracking reliability as a practical criterion.

It means that EU legitimacy in Ukraine is not primarily a function of normative attraction but of demonstrated commitment in conditions where commitment is costly. An officer from the EUACI in Mykolaiv makes the strategic logic explicit: 'especially after USAID and the US disappeared with the new administration, we understand that this is the time for the EU to step up'. The EU's enhanced legitimacy is therefore partly endogenous to the geopolitical moment rather than purely a product of long-run socialisation. This has a corollary: trust built on demonstrated reliability is more fragile than trust built on socialisation. If EU support becomes more conditional, more bureaucratic, or more visibly captured by the accession process's procedural demands, the legitimacy premium it currently holds may erode faster.

The Pravo-Justice representative points to an additional layer of complexity that complicates this picture. They distinguish between formal alignment with EU standards and the internalisation of the values those standards are meant to express: 'the EU is, first and foremost, about values. These values should guide how decisions are made. And I think that's something many in our legal elite still need to grow into, mentally and culturally'. Citizens may trust the EU as a geopolitical anchor before elites have absorbed the normative content of EU governance. The citizen-level and elite-level dimensions of Europeanisation are running on different timetables, and this asymmetry has direct consequences for how democracy promotion instruments operate in practice.

Strategic geopolitical reasoning

The peace-negotiation vignette translates diffuse geopolitical trust into a concrete strategic choice, and its results are revealing in both what they confirm and what they complicate. When asked to choose a mediator in a hypothetical peace negotiation scenario, 65.1 per cent select the EU as their first preference. Strong trust in the EU's proposal is expressed by 31 per cent and somewhat trust by 41.3 per cent, yielding a combined positive figure of 72.3 per cent, substantially above any other actor. These figures are consistent with the general trust data but go further: they reveal that Ukrainian citizens are willing to assign the EU a sovereign political role, as a representative of their interests in negotiations that determine the country's future, not merely a technical or financial one. This is a significant expression of high-density normative and political linkage between Ukraine and the EU, in the terms of Levitsky & Way's framework.

The preference ordering in the vignette also reveals how citizens reason geopolitically when forced to make comparative choices. The EU is the strong first choice; the US (10.5 per cent first pick, 30.2 per cent second pick) and the UN (5.4 per cent first pick, 23.8 per cent second pick) are supplementary rather than alternative options. This suggests a strategic logic of primary and reserved supplementary partners, a hierarchy that corresponds closely to how institutional actors within Ukraine's reform ecosystem themselves describe the external landscape. The EUACI officer in Mykolaiv, situated at the intersection of these relationships, summarises the anti-corruption rationale that underpins the EU's primacy: 'the main problems with Ukraine, in terms of EU accession, are corruption and the judiciary not functioning as it should (...) if Ukraine doesn't overcome corruption, that's the go-no-go for EU accession'. At the citizen level, the logic runs in the other direction as well: EU accession is the go-no-go for a stable post-war future, which means that

anything associated with the EU's agenda is partially legitimised by its connection to that future. The vignette captures this fusion of normative aspiration and strategic calculation.

External leverage and its limits

The RE-ENGAGE framework identifies Russia, China, and Turkey as potential 'external spoilers' whose engagement sustains authoritarian tendencies rather than democratic reform, providing domestic elites with leverage to resist EU conditionality. The vignette data allows an empirical test of whether these actors have any purchase on Ukrainian public opinion that could function as such a counterweight. For China, the answer is unambiguous. 62.1 per cent of respondents strongly distrust a Chinese mediation proposal, with a further 17.3 per cent somewhat distrustful. Only 1.5 per cent strongly trust it. The analytical significance is not merely that China is unpopular, but that it has no societal foothold from which to operate as an alternative source of external legitimacy. In other hybrid regime contexts, Chinese investment and political support have given domestic elites an exit from EU conditionality, allowing them to access patronage networks outside the EU's normative framework. In Ukraine, that dynamic has no equivalent at the citizen level. The black knight mechanism, for China, is structurally blocked by public opinion itself.

Turkey's position complicates the picture in ways the external spoiler literature does not fully anticipate. The vignette data shows 36.4 per cent of respondents neutral on Turkish mediation, the largest neutral bloc of any actor, with distrust only slightly ahead of trust. In the third-choice ranking, Turkey receives 22.1 per cent, making it the most common third preference. This is pragmatic ambivalence: Turkey is held in reserve as a potential utility actor with practical brokerage capacity, without being normatively trusted. It does not function as an external spoiler in the traditional sense; there is no evidence that it provides domestic elites with legitimisation resources that compete with EU accession incentives. Its role is more contingent and transactional.

The structural tension between external trust and internal legitimacy deficits

In the empirical data, we observe the coexistence of high trust toward external actors and deep scepticism toward domestic political institutions, the decoupling, established in the previous section, between citizens' confidence in external

partners and their assessment of the domestic governance environment. External trust therefore seems to compensate for internal legitimacy deficits.

The representative from the EUACI in Kyiv articulates the tension from inside the programme model. The local ownership principle is both EUACI's methodological commitment and its structural protection against political capture: 'the fact that we rely on local ownership to work does protect us, in Mykolaiv, it's the mayor who has enemies, not us'. But reliance on local ownership also means that wherever that ownership is shallow, captured, or performative, the programme's effects will be similarly limited. The tension between the EU's unusually high external legitimacy and the fragility of the domestic ownership it formally depends upon is not a technical problem to be managed. It is a structural feature of democracy promotion in a hybrid regime, and it connects directly back to the visibility gap identified in the previous section: citizens trust the EU as a political horizon while remaining largely unaware of what EU-supported programmes have concretely changed in their institutional environment. High aggregate geopolitical trust and low specific programme recognition are not simply a communication failure; they reflect the deeper disconnect between the EU's role as an external credibility anchor and its capacity to generate the domestic ownership that lasting democratic change requires.

Disinformation and the contested character of geopolitical representations

The geopolitical representations captured in the survey do not emerge in a neutral information environment. The representative of the EU delegation in Kyiv identifies disinformation as a structural feature of the context in which EU democracy promotion operates: 'the war is not only happening on the frontline, but also around disinformation. We need to do pedagogical work; we need also to confront disinformation coming from outside'. He observes that Ukraine's situation differs from the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Georgia because the existential stakes are higher and Russian operations must work around stronger national solidarity: 'here people are defending their homes and it's not easy for Russia, they need to be more subtle'.

The officer from the EUACI in Mykolaiv reinforces this at the level of the media environment on which public accountability depends, 'a lot of the journalistic material that's made is very low quality, because there's not a strong tradition of paying for media in Ukraine. People get their news for free through Telegram, and that means a lot of clickbait news. Clickbait, that's the least bad, basically. It also

gives the Russians a very good environment for spreading information operations. And people are very vulnerable to these things, most people will say I can distinguish what is fake news and what is truth, but that's very difficult, especially if you don't know what the sources are'. He points to the structural vulnerability at the heart of this: 'there are some very influential Telegram channels with basically one person, or five people, or you don't even know who the people are. Very often they are anonymous, and we know that some of these channels are paid off by certain actors'. EUACI's support for investigative media, including BIHUS info, Hromadske Telebachennya, and Ukrainska Pravda, responds to this directly, positioning media support not as a peripheral civil society activity but as a structural condition for the accountability mechanisms that give anti-corruption reform social traction.

The survey data cannot distinguish between organic scepticism and manufactured doubt within the 13.7 per cent who perceive EU engagement as aggravating non-democratic tendencies. What it shows is that at the aggregate level, information operations have not succeeded in destabilising the EU's position as the primary geopolitical anchor. But this stability should not be mistaken for permanence. It is sustained partly by the war's sharpening of geopolitical identities, and its durability under conditions of potential ceasefire, reconstruction, and elite consolidation around new economic interests remains genuinely uncertain. The combination of low-quality media, anonymous Telegram channels, and war-driven institutional opacity that the officer from EUACI in Mykolaiv describes constitutes a permissive environment for exactly the subtle Russian operations that the representative of the EU delegation in Kyiv warns about, and one that the instruments of technical democracy promotion are not, by themselves, well designed to address.

Perceptions of the EU and democracy promotion assistance

The preceding sections have established two findings that stand in tension with one another. The first analytical section showed that trust in the EU exceeds trust in most domestic institutions, and that awareness of specific EU-funded programmes is low, only 9.9 per cent for Pravo-Justice and 28.1 per cent for EUACI. The following one showed that the EU enjoys a form of relative geopolitical monopoly on normative legitimacy in Ukraine, expressed most starkly in the vignette data where 65.1 per cent select the EU as their preferred mediator and 72.3 per cent express trust in an EU-led initiative. Together these findings raise a question that this section addresses directly: what exactly are citizens trusting when they trust the EU, and does that trust extend to the specific instruments and approaches through which EU democracy promotion operates? The distinction between the EU as a political

horizon, an imaginary of democratic governance, security, and post-war reconstruction, and the EU as a concrete governance actor whose programmes and methods can be assessed and critiqued is analytically central to understanding both the achievements and the limits of EU engagement in Ukraine.

Between political horizon and governance actor: approval, expectations, and the visibility gap

The survey data confirms that the EU enjoys broad approval across multiple functional domains. 87.6 per cent of respondents agree that the EU is important for the economy, 81.2 per cent for security, 78.8 per cent for democracy, and 77.5 per cent for rule of law. 72.4 per cent say EU support to Ukraine is well placed. These are striking figures and they are consistent across the different instruments used in the survey. Taken at face value, they suggest a Ukrainian public that is comprehensively and enthusiastically pro-European.

But the approval figures conceal an important internal dynamic. When respondents are asked not about the EU in general but about the specific effect of EU support for democratic development, the picture becomes more differentiated. 47.4 per cent say EU support helped promote democracy, 16.3 per cent say it contributed to peace and territorial integrity, a broadly positive combined majority of around 64 per cent. But 13.7 per cent say it aggravated non-democratic tendencies, and 5.4 per cent say it had no effect. As established in the previous section, the internal composition of the critical minority is analytically significant: among those who perceive aggravated non-democratic tendencies, 52 per cent attribute this to corruption being fuelled, 32 per cent say programmes only benefit elites, and 16 per cent say it undermined the judiciary and rule of law. This is not diffuse dissatisfaction, it is a coherent critique of the specific mechanisms by which democracy promotion can fail in a hybrid regime context, and it maps closely onto the theoretical concerns about 'stabilitocracy', elite capture, and selective compliance developed in the literature review- High generalised trust in the EU as a political horizon coexists with a structurally coherent minority critique of EU democracy promotion as a concrete governance practice. The two are not contradictory, they reflect the distinction between what the EU represents as an aspirational project and what specific EU-funded initiatives have delivered in practice.

The survey data on what the EU is considered important for also reveals a set of expectations that are simultaneously broad and demanding. Citizens are not asking the EU to help with one dimension of governance: they are assigning it a

comprehensive role across the domains that matter most for their daily lives and their country's future. Against this backdrop, the specific outputs of EU-funded democracy promotion programmes can appear narrow and technical. Pravo-Justice works on judicial reform, prosecutorial reform, and legal alignment with EU standards, essential for accession but not immediately legible to citizens experiencing 71.2 per cent dissatisfaction with rule of law. EUACI works on institutional capacity building, anti-corruption infrastructure, integrity city governance, and civil society support, real and measurable, as the process tracing documents, but largely invisible at the citizen level. The Pravo-Justice representative opens up about the extended time horizon required for normative change: 'some things are already tangible, like technical solutions and certain procurements, but other changes definitely need more time and investment'. They identify the gradual adoption of European Court of Human Rights practice in Ukrainian courts as an instructive precedent: 'when it first came in, the entire judicial community was quite cautious, it was something unknown and unexplored. But now, after more than a decade, we clearly see the courts actively applying ECHR practice'. The next milestone is the European Court of Justice: 'right now, what we're aiming for and working on is promoting the use and study of the ECJ's practice. It's important that courts understand what it is, how they should consider its rulings, and how it differs from the ECHR. This is crucial in the broader context of European integration'. These are genuine reforms, and their cumulative effect on the quality of Ukrainian jurisprudence is real. But they operate on a decade-plus timescale, and their results are not visible to citizens experiencing the rule of law system from the outside.

The Mykolaiv case illustrates both the potential and the limits of a more grounded approach. The advisor for the Mykolaiv municipality describes a model explicitly designed to close the gap between institutional reform and citizen experience, procurement procedures that save measurable amounts of public money, supervisory boards that bring independent oversight to communal utilities, damage monitoring systems that feed into reconstruction planning. Yet even she acknowledges: 'such soft projects, it's difficult to feel on yourself (...) the real result will be visible through two or three years'. The causal chain between programme intervention and citizen experience is long, and citizens are unlikely to attribute improved utility services to an EU-funded governance reform even when that connection is direct.

This is confirmed by the survey data. Most respondents, 57.6 per cent, report no awareness of any local CSO activities aimed at building trust. Awareness of specific EU-funded programmes remains low: only 9.9 per cent have heard of Pravo-Justice and 28.1 per cent of EUACI. Institutional reforms can have tangible governance consequences without generating recognisable political credit, and the gap between what programmes achieve and what citizens perceive is not merely a communication problem. It is a structural feature of how technical democracy promotion operates in a hybrid regime: through institutional channels that are, by design, at a remove from the everyday experience of the citizens whose trust they are ultimately meant to build. High generalised trust in the EU as a political horizon and low specific programme recognition are not simply a communication failure, they reflect the deeper disconnect between the EU's role as an external credibility anchor and its capacity to generate the domestic ownership that lasting democratic change requires.

Conditionality, ownership, and the implementation gap

The dominant model of EU democracy promotion in Ukraine combines top-down conditionality, reforms required for accession progress, with capacity building support delivered through implementing partners to institutional beneficiaries. The accession framework has proven effective as a political lever in specific windows of opportunity. As the Pravo-Justice representative notes, the programme contributed directly to Ukraine meeting two of the seven EU conditions for candidate status. The EUACI representative in Kyiv describes how their agency provided inputs to EU Commission reports and helped both the Ukrainian government and EU institutions prepare for accession screening meetings. These are not trivial contributions for they shaped the formal terms of Ukraine's integration trajectory.

But the conditionality model carries structural risks that the interview material addresses frontally. The Pravo-Justice representative describes a parliamentary environment where EU recommendations have progressively lost traction: 'working with parliament can be difficult. If you look at the current parliamentary composition, the cooperation we had at the beginning has definitely shifted. There are different reasons for this, including, quite frankly, a sense of fatigue within the current parliament. And right now, they're not really paying close attention to EU recommendations'. He adds that political change is a constant structural challenge: 'anytime there's a new government or leadership in parliament, we need to revisit and align our work plan with their new agenda. This also applies to institutional changes, for example, when a new Prosecutor General is appointed, it directly

impacts us, especially given our work on prosecution reform and war crimes accountability'. The conditionality model assumes a stable and motivated counterpart on the Ukrainian side. When that counterpart changes, loses interest, or is captured by competing interests, the leverage that conditionality provides weakens considerably.

The ownership model, in theory, addresses this by embedding reform in domestic institutions rather than relying on political will at the top. Both EUACI and Pravo-Justice describe versions of this. The EUACI representative in Kyiv explains that their agency work in cities depends entirely on local political engagement: where mayors and city councils are not interested in the programme's agenda, nothing can be done. Relying on local ownership also provides a degree of political protection, the political costs of reform are carried by the local authority that has adopted them, not by the programme. An advisor for the Mykolaiv municipality makes the principle concrete: 'always the result of the project is a really changed process that is recorded in all normative documents, and which takes place without the introduction of the programme'.

Yet the EUACI officer in Mykolaiv identifies a structural dependency that the ownership model creates rather than resolves: 'if the Ukrainian side is not changing this point, then it will end up being very much driven by donors such as us. And we will decide what needs to be done. And that just means that Ukrainians won't get better, because that will just be us doing all the planning and the implementation and the monitoring and then just handing over things to Ukrainians. And that's not what we want, because Ukraine needs to become an EU member. And if you want to be an EU member, you should be able to do these things yourself'. He traces the structural roots of the problem to a decades-long absence of strategic planning culture at the municipal level: 'if you're a director of the water utility company, your task the last 40 years has just been minimising costs. You haven't even had money to cover your daily operations. The mayor would appoint you to become director, and the mayor would tell you: reduce costs as much as possible, don't make any investments, don't do anything'. The wartime context has deepened rather than resolved this: 'things have just been aggravated. Now it's three months, six months plans. And that's not a way to govern a city of half a million people'.

The ownership problem therefore has two faces. Where local ownership is genuine and politically committed, as in Mykolaiv under a mayor who has made integrity governance central to his reconstruction agenda, the model can produce real and durable institutional change. Where local ownership is performative, captured, or

simply absent, the model produces outputs that exist on paper without transforming practice. The Pravo-Justice representative identifies the same duality at the national level: 'the most effective area has been judicial reform. But even that raises the question of why it progressed. There's a political element involved (...) there are many things that are outside the control or will of the project, regardless of our intentions'. Reform happens when political incentives align with programme objectives, and stalls or reverses when they do not. This tension is compounded by the persistent gap between legislative reform at the national level and implementation on the ground. The Pravo-Justice representative names it directly: 'you can have the most well-crafted legislation, but how it gets implemented on the ground is a completely different story. There's also this persistent gap between the centre and the regions'. The EUACI officer in Mykolaiv arrives at the same observation from the municipal level and draws a strategic conclusion: 'Ukraine is right now implementing a lot of EU legislation or trying to get closer to EU legislation, but there are many laws in Ukraine that are not being enforced (...) you cannot handle all those things from Kyiv, you need to follow up on the municipal level'. A reform approach that concentrates on legislative alignment at the national level, the dominant logic of the accession screening process, produces formal convergence that may or may not translate into changed governance practice at the level where citizens experience it. The municipalities, communal enterprises, local courts, and regional administrations that constitute the everyday governance environment of most Ukrainians operate according to logics that national legislation alone does not transform. EUACI's Integrity Cities model represents a deliberate attempt to address this gap, working at the municipal level, embedding results in local institutional decisions, building from the ground up rather than from the capital down. But it is expensive, slow, and dependent on conditions that cannot be assumed across Ukraine's diverse and uneven municipal landscape.

Elite capture, selective compliance, and the limits of technical programmes

The risks identified in the literature review, that EU conditionality can inadvertently reinforce stabilitocracy by engaging with elites who perform compliance while preserving underlying patrimonial structures, are not hypothetical in the Ukrainian case. They are documented in the interview material across multiple dimensions.

The representative of the EU delegation in Kyiv describes the political economy of reform resistance with precision: 'you know the challenge is that not everybody is super excited about getting into the EU in the next five or ten years. You have some people who still have their economic interests and who built their power or fortune

in the current system. So, they know how the system works and they don't really appreciate the changes'. He is direct about how the war economy has generated new layers of vested interest: 'there are also those who have profited from the war market, development of new weapons, drones, IT, who are getting contracts that don't fully follow open competition (...) and of course when you talk about enhancing the prevention of corruption in the military process, they get nervous'. He identifies the Verkhovna Rada as a specific site of accumulating resistance: 'they have been there already five years, some of the MPs are tired, some of the MPs maybe they got their own interests that they want to also keep, and the legal changes that have to happen on a legal level, they don't happen that smoothly as used to be the case in 2023 or 2024 when Ukraine requested to be a candidate'. The urgency of accession provided a political incentive structure that generated reform momentum, and as that urgency has been partially absorbed into a longer accession timeline, the incentive structure has weakened.

The defence sector represents the sharpest expression of this dynamic, and the point at which wartime emergency provisions have been most systematically instrumentalised. The EUACI officer in Mykolaiv identifies the mechanism: 'martial law did a lot of bad things to the anti-corruption effort. Because it allowed many things that we had been fighting to open, suddenly to become closed, declarations of personal assets of officials, procurement in the Ministry of Defence'. He is candid about the political economy behind the closures: 'I suspect that a lot of people in the Ukrainian government used the invasion to close down some of this public publicity. I don't quite understand what should be the reasoning behind closing access to declarations of officials just because there's a war going on, if I own a Mercedes, is that a piece of strategic information that the Russians cannot know?' The result is a structural opacity that is extremely difficult for international partners to challenge: 'those are the sectors with the least amount of publicity because they refer to security considerations (...) but that makes these sectors extremely attractive for people with bad intent. And there's very little we can do about it as international partners, because they will refer to security considerations'.

The July 2025 crisis represents the most acute expression of these dynamics and the point at which the structural limits of the technical programme model became most visible. The EUACI representative in Kyiv describes EUACI's response with the candour of a programme that found itself constrained at precisely the moment when intervention mattered most: 'we had a technical programme. We are not those formulating politics or expressing political positions. So we could not go out in the

public, engage in this debate that was ongoing. I think that would be negatively perceived by EU and Denmark, and probably by the Ukrainian government'. He is explicit that this constraint was genuinely difficult: 'here we saw our close partners that we are working with every day under attack, and we couldn't really do anything'. The programme's response was necessarily indirect, analytical materials for EU recommendations, communications support for partners, facilitated dialogue between stakeholders, real but, as he acknowledges, 'not very visible'.

This episode reveals a structural limit of the technical programme model that goes beyond the specific dynamics of July 2025. Technical programmes that operate through institutional partnerships and depend on government cooperation cannot publicly oppose the governments they work with without destroying the access and trust on which their work depends. This is not a failure of design; it is an inherent feature of the model. But it means that at moments of acute democratic backsliding, the instruments best positioned to intervene institutionally are precisely those least able to do so publicly. The political leverage that formal EU conditionality provides is exercised at the level of EU-Ukraine diplomatic relations, not through programme-level action.

The NABU officer identifies the same structural risk from the beneficiary side, and with a frankness that should be read as an asset rather than a problem: 'I don't want international partners to be fooled by Ukrainians (...) sometimes we are said one thing and done a different thing. You cannot be played by our government, whoever the representative of the government is'. This is a warning about selective compliance and performative reformism from within the reform ecosystem itself, an acknowledgement that the theatre-state dynamics described by Bøås, Giske & Osland (2024) are operative even in institutions that are, by Ukrainian standards, relatively well-regarded. The external legitimacy that international partners provide can be instrumentalised by Ukrainian actors who understand its value and know how to signal the right things to maintain it.

Civil society, media, and the reach of EU engagement

A distinctive feature of the EU's democracy promotion model in Ukraine is its substantial investment in civil society organisations and independent media. The EUACI representative in Kyiv describes approximately 25 civil society and media partners, with around €3 million of EUACI's €17.5 million three-year budget going to CSOs and media, including Transparency International Ukraine, BIHUS info, Hromadske Telebachennya, Ukrainska Pravda, and others. The rationale is explicit:

civil society serves as a monitoring and accountability layer that compensates for the limitations of formal institutions, and independent investigative media creates the information environment on which public accountability depends. This is consistent with the survey data: at 61.3 per cent trust, civil society organisations rank significantly above most political institutions and are seen by citizens as watchdogs capable of monitoring state performance.

But the model raises structural questions that the interview material surfaces without fully resolving. The EUACI representative in Kyiv is careful to position their relationship with civil society partners as something other than straightforward grant-giving: ‘our purpose is not first of all to support civil society, but we are also having a specific dialogue with them, and we engage with them in our work with anti-corruption institutions, and we want to be a platform for like interactions between civil society, anti-corruption institutions, and governing partners’. The distinction matters: civil society as a platform for triangulated accountability, rather than civil society as a client receiving EU resources, is a very different dynamic. Yet the structural risk of client dependency is not fully avoided by this framing. When EU-funded programmes become the primary or dominant funders of civil society organisations over sustained periods, the organisations’ independence, which is the source of their accountability value, can be compromised in subtle ways. Organisations that depend on EU grants for operational survival have institutional incentives to align their priorities and framings with those of their funders, to avoid public positions that might jeopardise renewals, and to compete for EU resources in ways that fragment rather than coordinate civic accountability efforts. This is the dynamic that generates what the original research notes describe as ‘rent politics when civil society organisations become EU’s tributaries’, a form of capture that operates not through direct political interference but through the financial dependency structures of project-based funding.

On media, the EUACI officer in Mykolaiv is direct about the limits of what targeted support can achieve in a structurally fragile information environment: ‘one of the big problems is that a lot of journalists are not very good journalists. A lot of the journalistic material that’s made is very low quality, because there’s not a strong tradition of paying for media in Ukraine. People get their news for free through Telegram, and that means a lot of clickbait news. It also gives the Russians a very good environment for spreading information operations’. Supporting BIHUS info or Ukrainska Pravda is valuable, but it does not address the structural conditions, weak media markets, dominance of free social media distribution, anonymous Telegram

channels, that make the information environment fragile and permeable to manipulation.

There is also the question of which civil society actors are reached, and which are not. EU programmes engage primarily with formalised, institutionalised civil society organisations that have the capacity to manage grant reporting requirements, engage in sustained policy dialogue, and operate within the procurement frameworks that EU funding requires. The informal civic networks documented by Cooper, Gueudet, Kostenko & Prokhorova (forthcoming), the evacuation networks, the volunteer brigades, the grassroots solidarity structures that have sustained both the war effort and civic resistance in occupied territories, largely fall outside this framework. They embody what Channell-Justice (2022) identifies as Ukraine's 'do-it-yourself' culture of self-organisation, and they represent a form of democratic civic energy that EU programming does not easily reach. The preference for organised, institutionalised civil society over grassroots civic activism is not unique to EU programming, it reflects the general logic of formalised development assistance, but it means that EU support for civil society may systematically reinforce a particular layer of civic actors while leaving the deeper, more informal layers of civic solidarity largely unsupported and unrecognised.

These limitations do not cancel the achievements. The EU's high legitimacy in Ukrainian public opinion gives it unusual political capital that can be deployed tactically within Ukrainian domestic politics. The EUACI representative in Kyiv describes how the accession framework creates political cover for reformers who need to justify unpopular institutional changes to domestic audiences, and how the mayor of Mykolaiv has drawn on his EU partnership as leverage within the city council when pushing through difficult governance reforms. The EU's legitimacy is a resource that can be deployed within Ukrainian domestic politics, a form of soft leverage that operates through the preferences and incentives of domestic actors rather than through direct conditionality alone.

But high aggregate trust in the EU does not provide protection against the specific mechanisms of hybrid regime capture. The 13.7 per cent critical minority, the July 2025 crisis, the parliamentary fatigue, the defence-sector opacity, none of these are resolved by the EU's strong position in Ukrainian public opinion. They reflect the structural features of hybrid governance that persist regardless of citizens' geopolitical preferences. The EU's political horizon legitimacy and its governance actor effectiveness operate in largely separate registers: the first is shaped by

citizens' aspirations and the war context, the second by the institutional and political economy dynamics that determine whether specific reforms take hold. The key analytical implication is that the EU's unusually strong position in Ukrainian public opinion creates conditions that are necessary but not sufficient for effective democracy promotion. Closing the gap between the EU's legitimacy as a political symbol and its effectiveness as a governance actor, between what citizens believe the EU represents and what EU-funded programmes can concretely deliver, is the central challenge that the conclusions of this report must address.

Conclusion

The central finding of this report is that Ukraine's wartime democratic resilience rests on horizontal trust, not vertical trust. Confidence in national government (30.6 per cent), national politicians (19.6 per cent), and bureaucrats (10.4 per cent) remains low, while trust in relatives and kin (88.6 per cent) is among the highest registered in the Re-Engage six country survey (Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine). The Ukraine Armed Forces occupy a distinct position, at 90.4 per cent, which should not be read as restored vertical legitimacy but as a symbolic investment in the institution most directly identified with national survival. It is this horizontal layer that constitutes the social infrastructure of Ukraine's civilian resistance, and it is this layer in which EU democracy promotion has, to date, invested comparatively little.

The protests of July and November 2025 are the clearest illustration of this horizontal capacity in practice. When Draft Law No. 12414 transferred core NABU and SAPO competences to the Prosecutor General on 22 July, the mobilisation that followed drew on the same horizontal civic networks, students, NGO activists, volunteers, that have organised since Euromaidan, and the corrective law was adopted within nine days. The episode demonstrates that this capacity for mobilisation is not contingent on institutional trust: SAPO's own trust score, at 34.3 per cent, is unremarkable, yet citizens mobilised in its defence regardless, suggesting that what was protected was a constitutional principle rather than an institution's record. The November protests, prompted by the disclosure of the Energoatom corruption scheme under Operation Midas, were animated by the same underlying demand for accountability and produced a measure of political consequence, the dismissal of the Head of the Office of the President, even as the investigation remained ongoing at the time of writing. In both instances, civic mobilisation demanded the accountability the state itself failed to supply, acting as a counterweight to institutions unable to defend their own independence.

Where EU-supported programming has engaged with this horizontal layer directly, rather than only with formal institutions, the results suggest the approach is worth pursuing further. The Mykolaiv Integrity City experience offers a local-level illustration of this: doubled competition in capital construction procurement, savings recorded at the municipal water utility, and recognition as the most transparent city among Ukraine's frontline municipalities. These outcomes are modest in scale and not yet fully testable, the representative from the Mykolaiv Municipality herself notes that their durability will only be visible after several years, but they are designed to be embedded in standing institutional decisions rather than dependent on the programme's continued presence. EUACI's broader operating model, grounded in local ownership and positioned as a platform linking civil society, anti-corruption institutions, and governing partners rather than as a conventional donor-beneficiary relationship, is oriented toward strengthening precisely this kind of horizontal capacity. Whether it can be scaled beyond Mykolaiv to Ukraine's wider and more uneven municipal landscape remains contingent on local political commitment that cannot be assumed uniformly, but it is among the clearer candidates this report identifies for the kind of EU engagement that the events of 2025 suggest is now warranted.

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Appendix I Ukraine Vignette–Survey Questionnaire

Re–Engage Survey–Vignette Questionnaire Ukraine

This questionnaire is part of the Horizon–project Re–Engage research project on the EU, democracy, and trust (**Interviewer: please read the gist of the survey–vignette experiment in the following**) in the context of hybrid threats harming the Eastern Neighbourhood of the Union among the candidate countries. This questionnaire delves into topics such as social trust, media habits, views on external involvement, assessment of contemporary EU engagement in Ukraine and the vignette story. The latter includes the innovative aspect of the data collection, seeking to catch interviewee behaviour when faced a plausible, yet fictional, story concerning peace negotiation scenarios. In the following, after the vignette story has been presented, the interviewee is requested to assess a wide range of responses. The responses are, in this case, a selection of initiatives offered by multilateral organizations and geopolitical players (United States, China, Turkey) with clearly defined interests in the conflict.

I would like to ask you some questions about trust, democratic development, governance, the EU and external involvement in Ukraine. Could you please spare us 25–30 minutes and answer some questions?

EU Re–engage		
MO 1	Questionnaire number	
MO 2	Interview date	 - -

MO 3	Interviewer code		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
MO 4	Place of interview		
MO 5	Start interview (time)	_ _ : _ _	
MO 6	End interview (time)	_ _ : _ _	
Demography and background (these brackets are to be put in the last section of this survey)			
DE1	Sex	M F	1 2

DE 2	Could you tell me what your age is?	18-29	1	
		30-54	2	
		55+	3	
DE 3	What is your citizenship?	Ukraine	1	Multiple choice
		Poland	2	
		Moldova	3	
		Bulgaria	4	
		Hungary	5	
		Romania	6	
		Azerbaijan	7	
		Other	97	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	

DE 4	What do you consider to be your ethnicity?	Ukrainian	1	
		Moldovan	2	
		Crimean Tatar	3	
		Bulgarian	4	
		Hungarian	5	
		Polish	6	
		Armenian	7	
		Greek	8	
		Russian	9	
		Belarussian	10	
		Other	97	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	
DE 5	Do you have close Russian relatives?	Yes	1	
		No	2	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	

DE 6	Where do you live now?	Kyiv	1	
		Kharkiv	2	
		Donetsk	3	
		Luhansk	4	
		Chernihiv	5	
		Sumy	6	
		Lviv	7	
		Crimea	8	
		Odesa	9	
		Kherson	10	
		Zaporizhzia	11	
		Other	97	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	
DE 7A	Did you live elsewhere prior to the war?	Yes	1	If 1, proceed toward s DE7B. If 2, 98, or 99, skip DE7B.
		No	2	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	

DE 7B	Where was your permanent residence prior to 2022?	Kharkiv	1	
		Donetsk	2	
		Luhansk	3	
		Chernihiv	4	
		Sumy	5	
		Lviv	6	
		Crimea	7	
		Odesa	8	
		Kherson	9	
		Zaporizhzhia	10	
		Other	97	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	
DE 7C	How many times have you moved after you left your permanent residency?	1	1	
		2	2	
		3	3	
		4	4	
		More than 4	5	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	

DE 8	What religious affiliation do you belong to?	Christian Orthodox	1	
		Christian Catholic	2	
		Christian Greek Catholic	3	
		Christian Protestant	4	
		Muslim	5	
		Judaism	6	
		Atheist	7	
		Other	97	
		No religion	0	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	
DE 9	What is the highest level of education you have completed?	None	0	
		Primary	1	
		Vocational training	2	
		Secondary	3	
		University bachelor	4	
		MA or PhD	5	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	

DE1 0	How would you define yourself financially? (Poverty line established by government — 62,93 EUR; min salary 166,27 EUR in 2025; country average salary — 426)	Poor Below average Average Above average Well off DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 98 99	
DE1 1	What is your individual monthly income (monthly gross salary in EUR)? Interviewer: remind the respondent that any income counts, not just their regular salary.	Below 150 151-400 401-600 601-1500 Above 1500 DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 98 99	

DE1	How do you	Liberal	1	
2	identify yourself	Conservative	2	
	politically?	Moderate	3	
		Social-democratic	4	
		Socialist/communist	5	
		Right	6	
		Green	7	
		Russia-oriented	8	
		Anarchist	9	
		Other	97	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	
About trust				
SJ1	Who do you think	1 Yes; 2 No; 98 DK; 99 NA		
	can be trusted?			

	Relatives and kins in Ukraine	1	2	98	99	
	Neighbours	1	2	98	99	
	Local government institutions (municipalities, 'hromadas', 'oblasts', special status city councils)	1	2	98	99	
	The church	1	2	98	99	
	The Ukrainian national government	1	2	98	99	
	The President of Ukraine	1	2	98	99	
	The Ukrainian Armed Forces	1	2	98	99	
	Displaced people living in Kyiv	1	2	98	99	
	Experts (intellectual elite)	1	2	98	99	
	Bureaucrats (all levels of government)	1	2	98	99	
	National politicians	1	2	98	99	
	Local politicians	1	2	98	99	
	International organizations	1	2	98	99	
	Civil society organizations	1	2	98	99	
	Traditional media (TV, newspapers, radio)	1	2	98	99	
	Social media (influencers)	1	2	98	99	
	Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office	1	2	98	99	
	International representatives of foreign governments (the US Embassy)	1	2	98	99	
	International representatives of foreign governments (the UK Embassy)	1	2	98	99	

		International representatives of foreign governments (the Embassy of Canada)		
SJ2	If you lose your income, who would you turn to for support? Interviewer: remind the respondent that he/she can select more than one option.	Relatives and kin in Ukraine Relatives and kin abroad Friends Local government institutions (municipalities, 'hromadas', 'oblasts', special status city councils) UN-institutions Informal contacts in government The local church Institutions of microfinancing/Bank Loan sharks Other No one DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 98 99	Multiple choice

SJ3	If you are the victim of a criminal offense, who would you turn to for support? Interviewer: remind the respondent that he/she can select more than one option.	Relatives and kin in Ukraine Relatives and kin abroad Friends The local government Connections Church Police Mass media Other No one DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 98 99	Multiple choice
SJ4	Which type of relations mainly define your neighbourhood?	Social cohesion/We get along Political conflict Religious conflict Ethno-national conflict Social conflict DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 98 99	Read out options MULTIPLE OPTIONS. If only 1, 98 or 99 skip to SJ6.
SJ5				

	Does the conflict in your neighbourhood promote violence or instability?	Yes No DK NA	1 2 98 99	
SJ6	Why do you think people support groups that promote violence or polarization? Interviewer: the respondent should rank the top three reasons. If he/she cannot give full three reasons, then just choose 'Do not know' where he/she stops.	Poverty Religious beliefs Nationalistic politics Lack of education Lack of jobs Declining social mobility The state provoked them Football hooliganism Violent media content Fear and desire to be protected Domestic background Other DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 98 99	Rank the three most relevant reasons.
		1 Very satisfied; 2 Satisfied; 3 Not so satisfied; 4 Not at all satisfied; 98 DK; 99 NA		

SJ7	Are you satisfied with your government effort to promote the following sectors?	Economy	1	2	3	4	98	99
		Health	1	2	3	4	98	99
		Democracy	1	2	3	4	98	99
		Rule of Law	1	2	3	4	98	99
		Infrastructure	1	2	3	4	98	99
		Security	1	2	3	4	98	99
		Education	1	2	3	4	98	99
		Housing	1	2	3	4	98	99
		Peace & national integrity	1	2	3	4	98	99
		Social cohesion	1	2	3	4	98	99

Trust in media				
MT	Which of these media outlets do you use the most in your daily life? Interviewer: if the respondent gives less than 3 sources, remind him/her that "Is there more?"; if he/she gives more than 3, take the first 3.	TV Marathon 'Yedyni Novyny'	1	Select three options If None -> PE01
1		Ukrainska Pravda	2	
		Radio Svoboda	3	
		NV.ua	4	
		Espresso.tv	5	
		UNIAN	6	
		BBC-Ukraine	7	
		STERNENKO	8	
		Korrespondent	9	
		TSN.ua	10	
		Censor.Net	11	
		Obozrevatel	12	
		Suspilne	13	
		YouTube	14	
		Facebook	15	
		Instagram	16	
		TikTok	17	
		Russia Today (RT)	18	
		Telegram	19	
		Other	97	
		None	0	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	

MT 2	Which of these media outlets do you trust the most for providing correct information? Interviewer: if the respondent gives less than 3 sources, remind him/her that "Is there more?"; if he/she gives more than 3, take the first 3.	TV Marathon "Yedyni Novyny"	1	Select three options
		Ukrainska Pravda	2	
		Radio Svoboda	3	
		NV.ua	4	
		Espresso.tv	5	
		UNIAN	6	
		BBC-Ukraine	7	
		STERNENKO	8	
		Korrespondent	9	
		TSN.ua	10	
		Censor.Net	11	
		Obozrevatel	12	
		Suspilne	13	
		YouTube	14	
		Facebook	15	
		Instagram	16	
		TikTok	17	
		Russia Today (RT)	18	
		Telegram	19	
		Other	97	
		None	0	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	

MT 3	In the case of an unexpected incident, which of these media outlets would you turn to for correct information? Interviewer: if the respondent gives less than 3 sources, remind him/her that "Is there more?"; if he/she gives more than 3, take the first 3.	TV Marathon “Yedyni Novyny”	1	Select three options
		Ukrainska Pravda	2	
		Radio Svoboda	3	
		NV.ua	4	
		Espresso.tv	5	
		UNIAN	6	
		BBC-Ukraine	7	
		STERNENKO	8	
		Korrespondent	9	
		TSN.ua	10	
		Censor.Net	11	
		Obozrevatel	12	
		Suspilne	13	
		YouTube	14	
		Facebook	15	
		Instagram	16	
		TikTok	17	
		Russia Today (RT)	18	
		Telegram	19	
		Other	97	
		None	0	
DK	98			
NA	99			
Personal experience with measures to build trust				

PE1	Are you aware of any activities from local organizations that aims to build trust in your local community?	Yes	1	
		No	2	
		DK	98	
	Interviewer: Please type the “?” function.	NA	99	
PE 01A	Have you heard any of the following programs? <i>Pravo-Justice</i> or <i>European Union Anti-Corruption Initiative</i> (Move this after PE2 and insert the two selected EU projects)	Pravo-Justice	1	
		European Union Anti-Corruption Initiative	2	
		Both	3	
		None	4	
		NA	99	

PE2	Are any of the following organizations involved in these activities?	Local government	1	Multiple choice
		State and entity-level government	2	
		The EU	3	
		The UN	4	
	Interviewer: read out the options. And remind the respondent that he/she can select more than one options.	World Bank	5	
		International NGO	6	
		NGOs in Ukraine	7	
		Youth Organization	8	
		Unions	9	
		Other	97	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	

PE3	Do you know if any of the following countries support the activities you identified above?	Germany	1	Multiple choice
		France	2	
		The UK	3	
		The U.S.	4	
		Poland	5	
		The Baltic states	6	
		Canada	7	
		Japan	8	
		Denmark	9	
		Sweden	10	
		Norway	11	
		Other	97	
		None	0	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	
PE4	Do you think that any of these organizations or countries working on trust help your neighbourhood?	Yes	1	
		No	2	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	

PE5	Based on your personal experience, how would you describe the impact of these activities?	Game changing	1	
		Somewhat helpful	2	
		Too little	3	
		No impact	4	
	Interviewer: read out the options.	DK	98	
		NA	99	
PE6	Which of the following statements describe these activities the best?	Right type of assistance	1	
		Misplaced – offered to the wrong recipients	2	
			3	
		Wrong type of assistance	4	
	Interviewer: read out the options.	Makes the situation worse	98	
		DK	99	
		NA		
General views concerning the EU involvement in your country (after the Vignette)				

GB V1	What do you think of the role of the EU in Ukraine?	1 Agree; 2 Disagree; 98 DK; 99 NA The EU is important for our economy The EU is important for our security The EU is important for democracy The EU is important for the rule of law	1 2 98 99 1 2 98 99 1 2 98 99 1 2 98 99	
GB V2	In general, do you think that the EU support to Ukraine is well placed?	Yes No DK NA	1 2 98 99	
GB V3	The EU claims it has given support for democratic development in Ukraine. Overall, what effect do you think this has had? Interviewer: read out the options.	It helped to promote democracy It contributed to peace and integrity in Ukraine It had no effect It aggravated non-democratic tendencies DK NA	1 2 3 4 98 99	If 3, pursue to GBV4. If 1, 2, 98 or 99, pursue to the demographic/personal question

GB V4	What is the main effect of the aggravated non-democratic tendencies?	It undermined the judiciary and rule of law	1	
		It fuelled corruption	2	
	Interviewer: read out the options. And remind the respondent that he/she can only select ONE option.	The programs only benefit the elites	3	
		Other	4	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	
Ukrainian defense willingness and civil resistance				
DW 1A	Are you willing to fight for your country?	Yes	1	
		No	2	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	
DW 1B	Would you be willing to take up arms to defend Ukraine?	Yes – immediately	1	
		Yes – if I were required by law	2	
		Maybe – it depends on the circumstances (e.g., unit of service)	3	
	Interviewer: Five-point scale. One option allowed.	No – I have good reasons to avoid conscription	4	Select one option.
		No – I would refuse to take up arms under any circumstances	5	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	

DW 1C	What are you willing to fight for?	A democratic and sovereign Ukraine Ukrainian identity and patriotism To protect my family To protect my country Restoration of 1991 borders None – I would not fight under any circumstances Other DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 98 99	Multiple choice (max 3 picks) randomized on of responses.
DW 2A	Imagine Ukraine obtained NATO-membership, and an ally were attacked, should Ukraine use military force to help defend that ally? Interviewer: Record the response on a scale.	Strongly agree Somewhat agree Neutral Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 98 99	If 2, 3, 4, 5, 98, or 99, proceed towards DW2B. If 1, skip DW2B and proceed to DW3.

DW 2B	In your opinion, under which conditions should Ukraine take military action? Interviewer: Multiple choice. Max three picks. With ranking (the first pick illustrates the most important and so forth). Show your device to the interviewee.	Only if it affects Ukraine's own security Depends on which country is the aggressor Depends on which country is under attack Ukraine should not get involved outside own borders Ukraine should focus solely on its own defense I am against NATO membership Other DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 98 99	Multiple choice Max three picks
DW 3	You will now be presented four descriptions of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. On a four-point scale, please rate whether you agree or disagree with the characteristics. <u>The Ukrainian Armed Forces are (...):</u> <i>Point score: (1) Strongly agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree, (4) Strongly disagree, (98) DK, (99) NA.</i>	Professional (clear line of command; not corrupt) Fully capable of defending the country Drafting recruits fairly Taking care of their troops (cost evaluation of engagement) Important symbol of national unity in Ukraine Facing issues with transparency about casualties and the rotation of troops		Individual assessment of each response.

DW 4A	Who do you think should be subject to conscription? Interviewer: Select all that apply and rank when multiple is chosen.	Only men in Ukraine Both men and women Ukrainians living abroad Everybody, but only in times of full-scale war Only volunteers and professional soldiers Other DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 98 99	Multiple choice
DW 4B	How do you view conscription in the Armed Forces today? Interviewer: Multiple choice (maximum three picks), with ranking (the first pick illustrates the most important and so forth). Show your device to the interviewee.	Necessity to defend Ukraine – no issues with it Builds unity and integration It allows citizens to step up and defend democracy I support it only in times of full-scale war Too many exemptions are granted Elites/rich manage to escape Conscription should be replaced by a professional army Concription violates individual freedom Other DK NA	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 98 99	Multiple choice max 3 picks

DW	How would you describe the relationship between civilians and the military in Ukraine?	Closely integrated	1	Pick one
5A		Mutually respectful	2	
		Lack of accountability/openness in the military	3	
		Growing disconnect between civilians and military	4	
	Interviewer: Choose the one that best reflects your opinion. Show your device to the interviewee.	Other	5	
		DK	98	
		NA	99	

DW 5B	In terms of civil resistance, do you participate in any of the following activities? I am (...): <i>Point score: (1) Yes, (2) No, (98) DK, (99) NA.</i>	Continuing with daily routines and work Giving up personal properties/resources for the benefit of the armed forces Donating money for the armed forces (via e-banking for.ex) Assisting with humanitarian aid to the AFU (e.g., weaving protective nets, making trench candles etc) Reporting suspicious people/activities to the relevant authority Housing or helping displaced people Participating in armed resistance Not taking part of any active resistance acts		Individual assessment of each response.
DW 5C	Are you trained, or willing to be trained, in handling light arms or weapons?	Yes No DK NA	1 2 98 99	If 1, proceed towards DW5D if 2, 98, or 99, skip DW5D

DW	Are you prepared to use	Yes	1	
5D	weapons in practice, if	No	2	
	necessary?	DK	98	
		NA	99	

The Vignettes

Instruction:

As the introduction (on page 1) briefly explained, the vignettes will be different in comparison with the other case countries in the Re-Engage project. This is, obviously, due to the ongoing war and security situation. In Serbia, BiH, Albania, Georgia and Moldova, the vignette story centred on a fictive economic crisis in which geopolitical players – the non-democratic ‘black knights’: Russia, Turkey and China – and, on the contrary, the EU, offered diverse rescue packages to assist the country in question. The rescue packages were based on realistic schemes and reflected the players’ geopolitical interests in the country. The vignettes were divided in two: Vignette I delved into the assessment of the rescue packages’ perceived impact in addressing the economic crisis, while Vignette II requested the interviewees to cherry-pick their three most-preferred rescue packages of their choice. By this conduct, we can analyze which geopolitical player the interviewee tends to trust when facing a crisis scenario – hence revealing the most trusted geopolitical actor.

For the Ukrainian vignette story, we aim to design a fictitious scenario building on peace negotiation processes. The EU, alongside the United States, the UN, China and Turkey, offer different stances and methods to facilitate peace and reconciliation initiatives – and each one of them have the ability and capacity to take the role as mediator between Ukraine and Russia. The context illustrates a scenario where the frontlines are in deadlock, and Ukraine nor Russia seem to have made any progression for months. As Europe and the United States are pushing Vladimir Putin to bring about a ceasefire, before Russian and mercenary troops permanently withdraw from Ukrainian soil, both warring parties are committed to put the weapons down. However, neither of them has an interest to make the first move – but they jointly agree to include a mediator, either a state or a multilateral organization, which can assist the warring parties to negotiate.

Still, we divide the vignette module in two: Vignette part 1 presents the interests of the potential mediating actors with their proposed initiatives, while Vignette part 2 allows the respondent to rank the different geopolitical actors on a trust scale. In this regard, we can map out which geopolitical actor Ukrainians trust the most to bring about peace in Ukraine – and also uncover the most trusted international actors.

To mitigate potential for selection bias, the CAPI program will randomly put the interviewers in three different groups:

- **Group 1:** Ask Vignette I first (multilateral organizations: the EU and UN) followed by Vignette II (initiatives from the US, China and Turkey).
- **Group 2:** Ask Vignette II first (initiatives from the US, China and Turkey) followed by Vignette I (multilateral organizations: the EU and UN).
- **Group 3:** Randomization to control for order effects.
- **Evaluation of the Geopolitical Actors:** For each vignette, respondents will:
 - **Rate each initiative** on a 1–5 scale based on perceived impact for the peace negotiation process mediated by the different actors (from ‘Very good impact’ to ‘Detrimental impact’).
 - Be explicitly instructed that you should not compare the initiatives to each other but you should instead consider each of them individually. That is why CAPI will have randomization to control for order effects.
 - “Don’t Know” (98) and ‘Not Applicable’ (99) options are included.
- **Part 2 of the Vignette:** Ranking trust of the geopolitical actors and multilateral organizations, considering the proposed initiatives presented in Vignette I and II.
- **Tips for the interviewers:**
 - **Purpose explanation:** When the vignette module commences, briefly explain what you are supposed to do. The survey is standardized, while the vignette is something new and different. Elaborate that you are describing a fictitious, yet plausible, scenario, followed by hypothetical responses/initiatives offered by a variety of geopolitical players and multilateral international organizations.

- Keep a neutral tone when presenting the vignette story. The interviewee should not, under any circumstances, get an impression of your own opinion about the matter.
- Be clear and concise in your presentation. Remember to use the “?” function on CSEntry if the respondent wants to get presented the vignette story once more.
- Do not reveal which geopolitical actors you will subsequently present. It’ll be a ‘surprise’ for the interviewee.
- Encourage the respondent to rate or quantify the respondents individually and not compare the initiatives with each other.

The Vignette Story

After years of Russian annexation and occupation of Ukraine, the war has reached a stalemate. Neither side have made any significant gains along the frontlines – indicating a deadlock. Even though Ukraine nor Russia have demonstrated capabilities to make progression, both countries have developed war economies – thus heavily militarized and unwilling to be the first to stand down.

Europe and the United States are pushing Vladimir Putin to bring about a ceasefire and permanent withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian soil. Under growing international pressure and domestic exhaustion, both Kyiv and Moscow are beginning to explore the idea of peace negotiations. However, neither warring party want to appear weak by making the first move. Behind closed doors, Kyiv and Moscow officials agree to involve a third-party mediator – either a state or a multilateral international organization – to facilitate negotiations and lay the groundwork for peace and reconciliation.

Several international players announce their candidacy and express willingness to be appointed as mediators. Each actor proposes a specific peace initiative and approach to reconciliation. The defending party of the conflict, the Ukrainian government, faces a critical call: Which mediator should they support and trust to represent its interests in this peace negotiation?

Vignette I (initiatives by international organizations)

The European Union (EU) has an interest in stabilizing the Eastern Neighbourhood and Europe as a whole and ensuring long-term security and strength. The EU proposes *The Voyage toward European Peace Framework* centered on preserving Ukrainian sovereignty, financial support to re-build infrastructure and gradually integrate Ukraine into the European Union framework. Mediation talks will be held in Geneva – hosted by Switzerland (a non-EU/NATO-member).

How much do you trust the EU's proposed initiative for helping Ukraine to achieve peace, reconciliation and sovereignty?

Strongly trust	1	Pick one.
Somewhat trust	2	
Neutral (neither trust nor distrust)	3	
Somewhat distrust	4	
Strongly distrust	5	
DK	98	
NA	99	

The United Nations (UN) strives to uphold international peace and humanitarian principles. UN proposes the *Multi-Track Peace Mission*, involving ceasefire monitoring mechanisms, peace negotiations and a coordinated framework for aid donors to support Ukraine's post-conflict recovery. The UN seeks to establish broad international consensus for this initiative.

How much do you trust the UN's proposed initiative for helping Ukraine to achieve peace, reconciliation and sovereignty?

Strongly trust	1	Pick one.
Somewhat trust	2	
Neutral (neither trust nor distrust)	3	

Somewhat distrust	4	
Strongly distrust	5	
DK	98	
NA	99	

Vignette II (initiatives from geopolitical actors: the United States, China and Turkey)

The scenario I just illustrated is replicated, and the United States has also offered its initiative:

The United States (the US) focuses on deterrence and demonstrating strength to preserve national interests. Simultaneously, the US seeks normalization of the relationship with Russia to deter future aggression. The US proposes a *Security Guarantee Agreement*, laying the foundation for US security commitments to Ukraine – inspired by article V in the NATO Treaty, even if outside of formal NATO membership.

How much do you trust the US proposal to help Ukraine to achieve peace, reconciliation and sovereignty?

Strongly trust	1	Pick one.
Somewhat trust	2	
Neutral (neither trust nor distrust)	3	
Somewhat distrust	4	
Strongly distrust	5	
DK	98	
NA	99	

Given the same context, **China** wants to maintain regional stability and expanding influence in Eastern Europe. China offers the “*Maintaining Peace Framework*”, underpinning neutrality and trilaterally. The framework proposes economic incentives for both warring parties to promote ceasefire and eventual negotiations for a lasting solution – including extensive investments in infrastructure, agriculture and rebuilding constructions devastated by Russian drones – and rejects Western post-war military engagements in Ukraine.

How much do you trust China’s proposed initiative for helping Ukraine to achieve peace, reconciliation and sovereignty?

Strongly trust	1	Pick one.
Somewhat trust	2	
Neutral (neither trust nor distrust)	3	
Somewhat distrust	4	
Strongly distrust	5	
DK	98	
NA	99	

Turkey has repeatedly offered premises for negotiations, now Turkey proposes the establishment of a ceasefire agreement followed by bilateral talks in Istanbul to end the conflict. Turkey claims that oil-rich Arab countries will invest heavily in both Ukraine and Russia if the ceasefire agreement leads to a peace deal.

How much do you trust Turkey’s proposed initiative for helping Ukraine to achieve peace, reconciliation and sovereignty?

Strongly trust	1	Pick one.
Somewhat trust	2	
Neutral (neither trust nor distrust)	3	

Somewhat distrust	4	
Strongly distrust	5	
DK	98	
NA	99	

Part II: Follow-up question of Vignette I and II

Given this context, please rank the actors presented in Vignette I and II in order of preference, from the one you trust the most to the one you trust the least.

Do you need me to read the context once more?

Interviewers: click the "?" for context information.

Which actors do you trust the most? Please choose your three most-preferred actors of your choice. - The first pick: the most trusted. - The second pick: the second-most trusted. - The third pick: the third-most trusted.	The European Union	1
		2
	The United Nations	3
		4
	The US	5
	China	98
	Turkey	99
	DK	
	NA	

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ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to fundamentally rethink their security policies. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, but also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to make sure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth

studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).