

# Conflict exposure and democratic values: Evidence from wartime Ukraine

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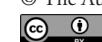
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## Abstract

How do experiences of violence in war shape ordinary people's commitment to democratic principles? Wars often lead to a temporary suspension of democratic rights, yet extant research suggests that wartime violence can both strengthen and undermine support for democracy. We argue that these effects vary across different dimensions of democracy. Drawing on public opinion surveys fielded in Ukraine in October 2022 and July 2024, amidst the ongoing war with Russia, we examine how experiences of wartime violence affect people's commitment to protecting three core liberal democracy principles: minority rights, freedom of speech, and free and fair elections. Our most consistent finding is that individuals who have been physically injured or lost a close family member or friend are less likely to be supportive of safeguarding the protection of minority rights. We find weaker, though still suggestive, evidence that such experiences are also related to attitudes toward freedom of speech. By contrast, experiences of wartime violence do not systematically influence views on safeguarding free and fair elections. These results speak to democratic resilience in Ukraine but underscore the importance of assessing individual democratic principles – rather than democracy in the abstract – as experiences of violence may impact different dimensions of democracy differently.

## Keywords

Democracy, elections, freedom of speech, minority rights, Ukraine, war

## Introduction

How does wartime violence shape ordinary people's commitment to democratic principles? Many wars are waged in the name of protecting democracy, yet we know little about how ordinary people – who bear the costs of violence – perceive the importance of safeguarding democratic principles in times of war. On one hand, wartime violence could strengthen social cohesion and people's commitment to democracy. On the other hand, experiences of violence might instead deepen divisions

and erode people's democratic commitment. Importantly, experiences of violence may affect *different* dimensions of democracy *differently*. This article explores these dynamics in war-torn Ukraine. As Russia's brutal war on Ukraine drags on, how have experiences of violence influenced Ukrainians' views on protecting key

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democratic principles, specifically free and fair elections, freedom of speech, and minority rights?

When Vladimir Putin launched his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, he cited geopolitical reasons: securing Ukraine's neutrality and preventing it from forming closer ties with NATO (e.g. President of Russia, 2022). He also offered a revisionist reading of history, denying Ukraine's sovereignty (e.g. Chotiner, 2022) and, without evidence, accused the Ukrainian government of committing a 'genocide' against Russian-speakers in the Donbas (e.g. Fisher, 2022). Equally important, though not articulated as a justification, was his concern over a thriving democracy on Russia's doorstep (e.g. Person and McFaul, 2022). Ukraine's path to democracy has been rocky, yet it has made steady progress since the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution. Indeed, by 2022, amidst a global wave of democratic backsliding, scholars hailed Ukraine as a leading democratizer (Boese et al., 2022). Today, Ukrainians are fighting not just for their freedom but also for democracy – at home and beyond. However, wars often force temporary suspension of democratic rights (e.g. since 24 February 2022, Ukraine has been under martial law), and a key concern is whether wars, like this one, may fuel democratic backsliding by weakening ordinary people's commitment to democracy.

Using public opinion data from surveys fielded in October 2022 and July 2024, we explore Ukrainians' views on specific democratic rights during the ongoing war, focusing on how experiences of violence since the full-scale invasion influence their commitment to protecting these principles. A key contribution of this article is to disaggregate the concept of democracy into three core pillars – free and fair elections, freedom of speech, and protection of minority rights – which is overlooked in studies that examine democracy as a broad, monolithic concept. Indeed, the causal mechanisms underpinning the relationship between experiences of violence and views on democracy suggest that we should *not* expect uniform effects across different democratic principles. The surveys, which were conducted in government-controlled areas of Ukraine, show that individuals who have been physically injured or lost a close family member or friend are less likely to be supportive of safeguarding the protection of minority rights. There is weaker, though still suggestive, evidence that such experiences are also related to attitudes toward freedom of speech. By contrast, experiences of violence do not systematically influence views on safeguarding free and fair elections. These results speak to democratic resilience in Ukraine but underscore the importance of assessing individual democratic principles.

We proceed as follows: first, and consistent with this special issue theme, we position the article within debates on the democracy–violence nexus, focusing on how violence may shape democratic resilience (cf. Masullo et al., 2025; Viganò et al., 2025). Next, we outline a theoretical framework for how experiences of violence may influence democratic principles differently. We then contextualize our article within recent developments in Ukraine, followed by a presentation of our empirical strategy, data, and findings. We conclude by considering broader implications for the resilience of democracy.

## Democratic principles and war

Commitment to democratic principles – such as free and fair elections, protection of civil liberties, and free speech – is fundamental for democratic resilience (e.g. Claassen, 2020; Easton, 1975; Lipset, 1959; Weingast, 1997). Such commitment is believed to strengthen voters' willingness to penalize incumbents who threaten democracy through executive takeovers (e.g. Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016). These takeovers, now the dominant form of 'democratic backsliding' (e.g. Bermeo, 2016; Svolik, 2019), often unfold gradually over several election cycles despite opposition from critics, media, and international observers. Their incremental gradual nature allows voters to counteract these actions by holding incumbents accountable (Svolik, 2020). Whether voters act, however, depends in part on their adherence to democratic values, underscoring their critical role in curbing democratic erosion and fostering democratic resilience.

While shocks such as war can create opportunities for democratization by, for example, weakening autocrats' hold on power (Miller, 2021), shocks can also present a risk to democracy by providing elites with opportunities to entrench power (cf. Dresden and Howard, 2016). Emergency laws can enable leaders with authoritarian aspirations to expand executive powers under the guise of constitutional legitimacy (Lührmann and Rooney, 2021). While these risks emphasize elite decisions, they are rooted in – and can be mitigated by – the population's commitment to democracy.

Existing research suggests that security threats – be those in the form of wars, terrorism, or crime – can both undermine *and* strengthen people's commitment to democracy. Experiences of violence can instil fear of others and a preference for potentially autocratic leadership (e.g. De Juan et al., 2024; Visconti, 2020). Alternatively, such experiences can promote pro-democratic sentiments

and political engagement (e.g. Bateson, 2012; Bellows and Miguel, 2009). Much research on the effects of political violence is conducted in post-conflict periods, tapping into legacies of wars and violence – which can endure even across generations (e.g. Balcells, 2012; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017). While understanding longer-term effects is crucial, investigating dynamics amidst conflict is equally important, as it sheds light on immediate micro-mechanisms that may inform both short- and long-term trajectories.

This article contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, by conducting surveys during an ongoing war, we capture the immediate effects of violence on democratic attitudes (cf. Alexseev and Dembitskyi, 2024a). Second, conducting surveys within a wartime context possibly lowers the threshold for dismissing these principles, thereby enhancing our ability to detect genuine variation in democratic support. Conventional attitudinal studies generally report high democratic support but may offer less insight into people's willingness to dismiss or de-prioritize democratic principles for other reasons (cf. Svolik, 2019; Graham and Svolik, 2020). By reflecting real-world contexts in which elites may present compelling – if not always reasonable – justifications for abandoning democratic ideals, we mitigate concerns regarding social desirability bias. Third, by breaking down the concept of democracy into three different principles – free and fair elections, freedom of speech, and protection of minorities – we can evaluate whether security threats impact each of them equally or whether any relationship between violence and democracy is mediated through specific dimensions of democracy (cf. Masullo et al., 2025). In doing so, we extend research showing that individuals may endorse some aspects of liberal democracy while rejecting others (Claassen et al., 2024).

Broadly defined as 'rule by the people' – perhaps the most well-known articulation being Dahl's (1971) polyarchy concept – the criteria for evaluating democracy are 'virtually unlimited' (Altman and Pérez-Liñán, 2002: 95). The conceptual scope and boundaries of democracy, along with empirical measures, have been widely debated (König et al., 2022). However, the three principles we emphasize – free and fair elections, freedom of speech, and minority rights – capture essential dimensions of liberal democracy and align with common understandings of democracy, in Ukraine and beyond. In a recent experimental study across six different countries, Chu et al. (2024) find that people consistently emphasize competitive elections and civil liberties as key characteristics of democracy. In Ukraine, Szostek and

Orlova's (2022) focus groups revealed varied interpretations of democracy: most participants associated it with freedoms, particularly freedom of speech (cf. Korosteleva, 2004), while some linked it to elections, and others emphasized more abstract ideas, such as authorities being responsive to the people.

Dahl's (1971) polyarchy concept emphasizes two core democratic dimensions: organized *opposition/competition* through regular free and fair elections, and *participation* that ensures all adults the right to vote and run for office. Diamond (1999: 8) posits that *civil liberty* underpins both of these dimensions, and without it, the others lack substance. Beyond electoral processes, liberal democracy is defined by 'a political system in which individual and group liberties are well protected' (Diamond, 1999: 5).

We focus on three core principles reflecting these dimensions. First, *free and fair elections* serve as a 'minimalist Schumpeterian standard' (Fishman, 2016: 295) and this is foundational for both opposition/competition and participation (Coppedge et al., 2008, 2011), determining whether citizens can choose their leaders through transparent and legitimate processes. Second, *freedom of speech* is essential for participation and embodies the civil liberty dimension (Coppedge et al., 2011; Diamond and Morlino, 2004), enabling citizens to influence and engage in governance by freely expressing views. Third, *protection of minority rights* is central to civil liberties, ensuring that cultural, ethnic, religious, and other minority groups can express their interests and preserve their language and culture (Diamond, 1999: 11). These rights are vital for ensuring that diverse interests are represented beyond electoral cycles.<sup>1</sup>

Recent research suggests that people's commitment to democracy in Ukraine has shown remarkable resilience amidst Russia's invasion. Surveys conducted a few months into the war showed that 76% of Ukrainians agreed that 'democracy is preferable to any other kind of government' (Onuch, 2022: 37; cf. Alexseev and Dembitskyi, 2024b). Alexseev and Dembitskyi (2024a) argue that external aggression has led Ukrainians to contrast the aggressor's (Russia) polity with their own, reinforcing Ukrainians' commitment to democracy. Additionally, individuals with a strong civic national identity – bolstered by the full-scale invasion (e.g. Onuch, 2023) – are particularly attuned to external threats, making them more likely to endorse democracy.

Our article forefronts how experiences of violence – specifically, personal encounters with external threats – do not uniformly shape attitudes toward different democratic principles. The literature suggests that

experiences of violence can diminish people's support for the protection of minority rights – a dynamic particularly relevant to Ukraine's context, where Russians have long been the largest minority group – as well as freedom of speech. However, existing research is less conclusive on how violence influences support for protecting free and fair elections.

## Theory: Do experiences of violence shape people's commitment to democratic principles?

We show that the mechanisms through which war shapes people's commitment to democracy go via the effects that violence has on intergroup relations, trust and social cohesion, and people's willingness to sacrifice civil liberties for security measures. Importantly, and recognizing that democracy rests on distinct principles, we extend existing research by arguing that these mechanisms may affect people's views on distinct principles of democracy differently.

### *Minority rights*

We begin by examining how violence influences intergroup relations and commitment to *protecting minority rights*. A key aspect of understanding the impact of war and violence on political attitudes lies in their effect on perceptions of the 'in-group' (one's own group) and the 'out-group' (the perceived enemy), as conceptualized by social identity theory (cf. Tajfel and Turner, 2004). Violence often reinforces in-group identification while intensifying distance, even hostility, toward out-groups.

In many conflicts, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, warring parties are divided along identity lines. Violence can intensify group divisions and solidify political and social identities, as observed in conflicts from Bosnia (e.g. Hadzic et al., 2020) to Israel (e.g. Canetti-Nisim et al., 2009; Grossman et al., 2015), Northern Ireland (e.g. Cairns et al., 2005), and Sudan (e.g. Beber et al., 2014). This has negative bearings on conflict reconciliation (e.g. Bar-Tal, 2000; Nadler et al., 2008). In an extensive meta-analysis of the legacies of violence, Barceló (2024) identifies the deepening of animosities toward wartime enemies and groups associated (or identifying) with them as the most consistent effect of such violence (cf. Godefroidt, 2023). While Ukraine's Russian-speaking population is not the aggressor, they may nonetheless be associated with the aggressor – and its language – due to atrocities committed by Russian forces (cf. Mischenko, 2023).<sup>2</sup> Putin's false claims of a

'genocide' against Russian-speakers,<sup>3</sup> used as a pretext for the invasion, directly linked Russian-speakers to the invasion and further complicates questions regarding the rights of Russian-speaking minorities.

Additionally, narratives that assign blame to groups not directly involved in the violence can trigger similar dynamics. Koenig (2023) argues that the defeat suffered by Weimar veterans fuelled the 'stab-in-the-back myth', attributing Germany's WWI defeat to internal betrayal by groups such as Bolsheviks and Jews, fostering support for anti-democratic, nationalist, and anti-communist right-wing movements. Similarly, De Juan et al. (2024) demonstrates that local WWI casualties in Weimar Germany amplified right-wing nationalist sentiments, as the loss of loved ones strengthened in-group solidarity and exacerbated out-group hostility. This response stemmed from desires for revenge and a need to reaffirm cultural worldviews as buffers against death-related anxieties.

Moreover, experiences of violence can weaken tolerance for out-groups beyond those directly or indirectly involved in the conflict. Armed conflict can erode political tolerance, reducing willingness to uphold civil liberties for those with differing views or identities (Hutchison, 2014). Societal threats, especially those arising from conflict and violence, can foster intolerance and create environments of enforced conformity and reduced openness toward minority groups (cf. Coser, 1956; Davis, 1995; Hadzic and Tavits, 2021; Viganò et al., 2025). Thus, experiences of violence can undermine commitment to protecting minority rights not only for groups directly or indirectly associated with the conflict but for perceived out-groups more broadly.

In conclusion, we identify several mechanisms through which experiences of violence may erode commitment to ensuring the protection of minority rights, both for conflict-associated out-groups and others viewed as different. There is little evidence of countervailing mechanisms to this trend. Accordingly, our first proposition:

*P1: Experiences of violence are negatively associated with support for safeguarding minority rights during war.*

### *Freedom of speech*

In a related vein, scholars have explored how security threats can prompt individuals to tolerate restrictions on civil liberties to strengthen the state's capacity to counter such threats, providing insights into public commitment

to safeguarding *freedom of speech*. For instance, Berinsky (2009) finds that support for civil liberties in the United States declined after 9/11, though it recovered by 2004. Similarly, Davis and Silver (2004) and Huddy et al. (2005) demonstrate that heightened terrorism fears post-9/11 correlated with reduced support for civil liberties. These trends manifest also cross-nationally, with individuals in states facing territorial threats exhibiting low political tolerance for their 'least liked' groups (Hutchison and Gibler, 2007). In such contexts, restrictions on civil liberties are almost invariably justified as necessary security measures (e.g. Sullivan and Hendriks, 2009). This dynamic holds particular salience in Ukraine, where freedom of speech is integral to people's conceptions of democracy (Korosteleva, 2004; Szostek and Orlova, 2022). The war demands a delicate balance between upholding civil liberties – particularly freedom of speech – and addressing the imperative to counter Russian propaganda. Most of the literature suggests a negative relationship between experiences of violence and support for civil liberties like freedom of speech, both generally and, especially, for conflict-related out-groups. In contrast, Rapp et al. (2019) argue that, to the extent violence fosters post-traumatic growth, it may enhance political tolerance, though their findings generally highlight a negative effect. Building on these insights, and focusing on the general principle of freedom of speech, we propose:

*P2: Experiences of violence are negatively associated with support for safeguarding freedom of speech during war.*

### *Free and fair elections*

Violence may also influence democracy via its effects on interpersonal and political trust, and social capital. Trust is fundamental to democratic stability (e.g. Mishler and Rose, 1997), underpinning the representative relationship between the state and citizens. Unlike autocracies, democracies cannot rely on coercion alone to ensure compliance with government regulations (e.g. Bianco, 1994). Crucially, mistrust in state institutions generally undermines adherence to these regulations (e.g. Levi and Stoker, 2000). While trust is essential for democracy overall, it is particularly consequential for commitment to *free and fair elections*. Elections inherently entail competition between groups, with winners and losers, thus demanding trust in others, in opponents, and in political authorities' ability and willingness to uphold electoral integrity (cf. Almond and Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1988). In the context of war – illustrated by

recent discussions in Ukraine (e.g. Onuch and Way, 2024) – trust in political authorities' *ability* to hold free and fair elections is as critical as trust in their *willingness* to do so. Moreover, democracy relies on social capital, which is nurtured by social networks that cultivate reciprocity and enable collective action (e.g. Putnam, 1993). Therefore, without trust and social capital, commitment to free and fair elections may weaken. However, existing research on how violence affects trust and social cohesion yields mixed results, hence we do not have a clear expectation for how experiences of violence shape people's commitment to safeguarding free and fair elections in wartime.

On one hand, experiences of violence can erode general (e.g. Rohner et al., 2013) and political trust (e.g. De Juan and Pierskalla, 2016; Grosjean, 2014; Hong and Kang, 2017). State failures to ensure citizens' safety – as frequently occurs in times of war – can further undermine political trust, given that a central duty of the state is to ensure its citizens' safety (cf. Fernandez and Kuenzi, 2009). Even in cases of invasion, where an initial rally-around-the-flag effect may first strengthen unity (as in Ukraine following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion), protracted conflicts can force difficult government decisions that erode trust over time, particularly among those most affected by violence. Violence can also disrupt civic associations that otherwise unify diverse societies and, instead, channel political participation into civic associations that cement wartime or parochial divisions (e.g. Colletta and Cullen, 2000). This dynamic reveals the darker, divisive side of civil society (cf. Gáfaro et al., 2014; Satyanath et al., 2017; Nussio, 2024), potentially undermining perceptions of electoral integrity in conflict-ridden areas.

On the other hand, exposure to violence may have pro-social effects, enhancing interpersonal and political trust (e.g. Gilligan et al., 2014; Sacks and Larizza, 2012) and reinforcing community and political engagement (e.g. Bateson, 2012; Bellows and Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009), potentially strengthening commitment to free and fair elections. Several theoretical mechanisms and empirical studies substantiate this, many drawing on surveys and experimental studies in post-civil war settings. Notably, individuals traumatized by violence may engage in pro-social behaviour to alleviate personal distress and act altruistically to reduce others' suffering (Staub, 2005). Additionally, violence can strengthen social capital by encouraging unity (Gilligan et al., 2014), *although* these pro-social effects are often confined to in-group solidarity (Bauer et al., 2016; Bowles, 2008) and may be less pronounced in highly polarized societies.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, the literature identifies plausible mechanisms through which violence can both bolster and undermine interpersonal and political trust, as well as social cohesion, with implications for attitudes to wartime elections:

*P3a:* Experiences of violence are negatively associated with people's support for safeguarding free and fair elections during war.

*P3b:* Experiences of violence are positively associated with people's commitment to safeguarding free and fair elections during war.

## The Ukrainian context

In a world undergoing 'democratic backsliding' (e.g. Bermeo, 2016; Diamond, 2008; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; Lührmann and Rooney, 2021; Mechikova et al., 2017), Ukraine, in the three years leading up to the 2022 full-scale invasion, stood out as a leading democratizer (Boese et al., 2022). Despite challenges, as evidenced by anti-corruption measures (e.g. Miller, 2023), Ukraine had made significant progress in reducing corruption, limiting oligarch influence, increasing government transparency, and protecting media freedoms, civil society, and the rights of ethnic minorities.

Since 2022, Russia's actions, marked by war crimes and severe restrictions on freedoms – including the imposition of martial law in illegally annexed regions of eastern Ukraine – pose the greatest threat to democracy in Ukraine (e.g. Amnesty International, 2024; OHCHR, 2022). However, for *any* nation facing security threats, such as Ukraine, there is a risk that these threats could foster democratic backsliding, both through governmental restrictions of freedoms and a shift toward non-democratic attitudes among citizens.

In response to the Russian invasion, the Ukrainian government implemented martial law, resulting in the postponement of elections (President of Ukraine, 2022a). From autumn 2023, discussions about the presidential election originally scheduled for March 2024 underscored the formidable challenges of organizing free and fair elections during wartime. Key challenges included enabling voting for Ukrainian refugees abroad, soldiers on the frontline, and citizens in Russian-occupied areas; facilitating campaigning and effective communication; and maintaining a fair media environment given that most TV channels are state-controlled. Ultimately, a consensus emerged to delay the elections (Melkozerova, 2023), broadly supported by the public (KIIS, 2024b) – and most international allies and

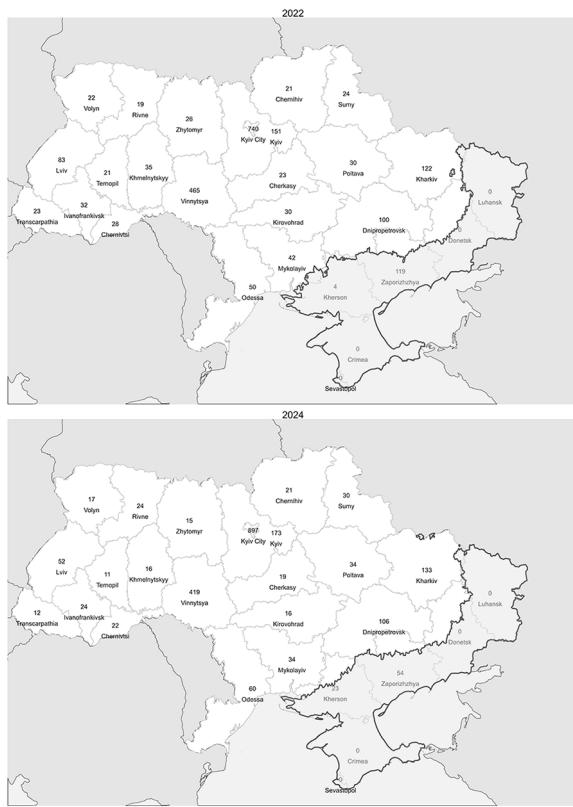
observers. Since the invasion, there have been both domestic and international critics voicing concerns about government actions such as consolidating TV platforms and suspending political parties linked to Russia, which were implemented to counter Russian disinformation and strengthen national unity (e.g. Feng, 2022). Additionally, Volodymyr Zelensky's signing of a new media law in December 2022 raised concerns about press freedom (e.g. Kyiv Independent, 2022). Observers generally agree that while winning the war is the immediate priority, potentially justifying temporary restrictions on democracy, a strong democracy is critical for sustainable peace (e.g. Mylovanov and Roland, 2023).

## Research design

Our research design draws on two original phone surveys conducted in October 2022 and July 2024, each involving approximately 2,210 respondents.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 displays respondent distribution. Both surveys were fielded by the highly experienced and reputable Kyiv International Institute for Sociology (KIIS). Conducting surveys in conflict zones presents reliability challenges due to insecurity, unpredictability, and the suffering caused by wars. Respondents may be reluctant to answer sensitive questions during rallying-around-the-flag periods, and sample representativeness may be compromised (cf. Rickard et al., 2025). For safety and ethical reasons, the surveys exclude respondents in active combat zones or areas under Russian control. Despite these limitations, carefully designed surveys can yield valuable insights into the attitudes of individuals in conflict-affected countries. Postponing surveys until the conflict ends risks limiting our understanding to pre- and post-conflict perspectives (Goodhand, 2000; Haer and Becher, 2012).

## Measuring democratic sentiments

There is ongoing debate on how best to measure democratic sentiments. Explicit questions, such as 'How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?', have yielded valuable insights but encounter three key challenges. First, variability and vagueness in citizens' perceptions of democracy can compromise the validity of such measures (e.g. Baviskar and Malone, 2004; Carlin and Singer, 2011; Carrión, 2008). Second, affirmative responses may reflect interviewer or social desirability bias, with respondents only paying lip service to democracy (e.g. Carlin, 2018; Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016; Kiewiet de Jonge and



**Figure 1.** Distribution of survey respondents.

Areas not controlled by the Ukrainian government are shown in grey, based on VIINA (Zhukov and Ayers, 2023). Surveys were not fielded in areas under Russian occupation (e.g. the respondents in Zaporizhzhya were not in the occupied areas of the oblast).

Nickerson, 2014), potentially masking anti-democratic sentiments. Third, while many support democracy in the abstract, they may reject its concrete freedoms, values, and norms (Carlin and Singer, 2011), and may selectively endorse certain democratic principles while rejecting others (Claassen et al., 2024).<sup>6</sup>

To address these limitations, some researchers use implicit questions focused on specific aspects of democracy, such as support for civil liberties or competitive elections (e.g. Booth and Seligson, 2009; Gibson et al., 1992; Schedler and Sarsfield, 2007). Respondents' support for democracy generally declines when asked about specific democratic practices (Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016), potentially revealing more realistic commitments to democratic principles – though this approach, too, faces challenges, such as agreeing on the relevant dimensions.

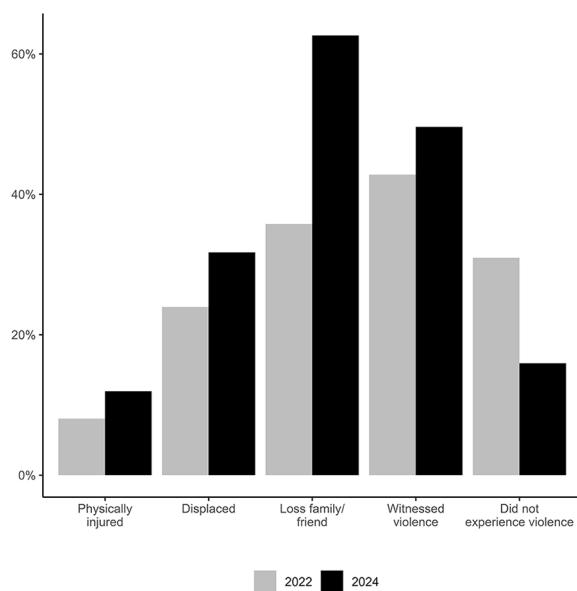
We leverage these insights by examining whether respondents agreed that three key pillars of democracy should be safeguarded, or ensured, during the war with Russia: *free and fair elections* (capturing opposition/competition and participation), *freedom of speech* (capturing

participation and civil liberty), and *protection of minority rights* (capturing civil liberty).<sup>7</sup> While these principles can be interpreted differently, we anticipate greater consensus on their meaning compared to the abstract term democracy. Respondents could answer 'not at all', 'a little', or 'a lot', with the option to select 'don't know' or refuse to answer. Responding 'not at all' to these questions does not imply that respondents dismiss democratic principles altogether; one can be committed to upholding democracy yet think that these principles must be suspended during war. However, by situating these questions in the context of the ongoing war, we seek to mirror questions that ask whether autocracy should be acceptable in certain circumstances. In this case, the certain circumstances – the realities of war – are not abstract but reflect respondents' lived experiences. This context provides a legitimate rationale for temporarily curtailing democracy, potentially reducing social desirability bias and enabling us to tap into mechanisms driving support or opposition to different aspects of democracy.

### Experiences of violence

To capture experiences of violence, our key independent variables, we include four binary measures: having been physically injured by Russian troops (such as being shot or injured by rocket or artillery fire), being displaced due to the war, losing a family member or close friend, and witnessing violence by Russian troops (such as seeing someone being shot by Russian troops or observing rocket or artillery fire in the distance) (questions in Online Appendix A1). Disaggregating experiences of violence allows us to understand the impact of specific forms of violence (cf. Yaylaci and Price, 2023). Figure 2 shows distributions across our questions.

In October 2022, 69% of our sample had encountered at least one form of violence. By July 2024, this figure had risen to 84%, averaging 77% across the two waves, with more than half of respondents having lost a family member or close friend in 2024. While the entire Ukrainian population are 'observers' of violence due to the pervasive awareness of the Russian invasion and its extensive devastation, these 77% are the direct 'recipients' of violence (cf. Pechenkina et al., 2019). Ranking the different experiences of violence by severity is challenging (cf. Rapp et al., 2019), and they all encompass direct personal encounters (cf. Ringdal et al., 2008).<sup>8</sup> One might argue that being injured in warfare is the most immediate and directly felt security threat, but losing a loved one can be just as, if not more, devastating, particularly when that loss involves one's child or



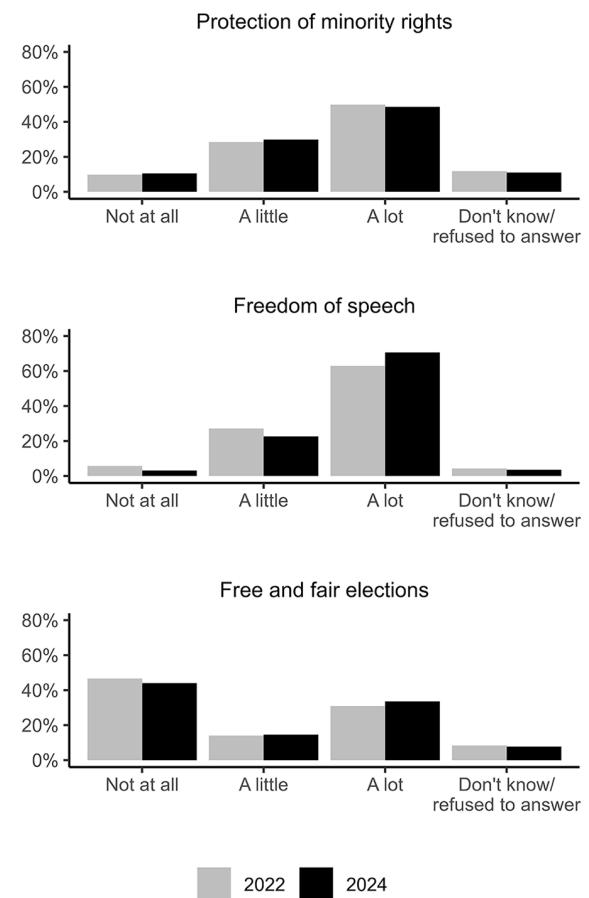
**Figure 2.** Distribution of experiences of violence among 2,210 respondents in 2022 (grey) and 2024 (black).

partner. Similarly, displacement from one's home may entirely disrupt one's life and cause deep psychological trauma, as can witnessing acts of violence.

## Findings

What do people think about safeguarding democratic principles in wartime Ukraine, and do these views differ depending on their experiences of violence?

As Figure 3 illustrates, responses are consistent across the two waves.<sup>9</sup> First, it shows that about half of the respondents support the protection of minority rights in the midst of war 'a lot' and a further third, 'a little'. International organizations raised concerns about the protection of minority language rights in Ukraine prior to the war (Denber, 2022). This issue is also central to the Ukraine-Council of Europe Action Plan. The rights of the Hungarian population in the Transcarpathia region of Ukraine (Stroschein, 2012) have long strained relations between the Hungarian and Ukrainian governments (e.g. Verseck, 2022). As we discuss below, the war itself has made the question of Russian language rights thorny. Our survey in 2022, conducted shortly before the adaptation of a new national minority law in Ukraine – which the Ukrainian government views as a step towards EU membership (President of Ukraine, 2022b) – reveals that, even amidst war and martial law, only a minority oppose ensuring the protection of minority rights.



**Figure 3.** Responses to 'Do you agree that the following should be safeguarded during the war with Russia...?' in 2022 (grey) and 2024 (black).

Second and similarly, Figure 3 shows that most respondents agree that freedom of speech should be safeguarded. Since the 2022 full-scale invasion, the Russian government has intensified disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining support for the Ukrainian government (Bergengruen, 2023). The Ukrainian government, countering Russian disinformation since 2014 (Fivenson, 2023; Way, 2019), was well-prepared for the information war but faced the challenge of balancing freedom of speech with national security, especially concerning media disseminating Russian-aligned disinformation. The strong support for ensuring freedom of speech in our survey aligns with public reactions to the 2022 legislation criticised for limiting press freedom.

Finally, and in contrast, the figure shows that 46% in 2022 and 44% in 2024 stated 'not at all' when asked if they agreed that free and fair elections should be safeguarded during the war. In 2022, these views may have been influenced by the contested, non-transparent

**Table 1.** Pairwise correlation test among three principles of democracy.

Variables	<i>Free and fair elections</i>	<i>Freedom of speech</i>	<i>Protection of minority rights</i>
Free and fair elections	1.000		
Freedom of speech	0.187	1.000	
Protection of minority rights	0.092	0.252	1.000

annexation referenda held by Russian-installed authorities in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhya in September 2022, just a month prior to this survey. The proximity to these enforced, sometimes violent (e.g. Polityuk, 2022), elections likely influenced negative perceptions toward even the feasibility of ensuring free and fair elections during war. Additionally, the practical challenges posed by war, compounded by the prohibitions of elections under martial law, which were a topic of much discussion in 2023 and 2024, likely contribute to the substantial proportion of respondents opposing the statement in the July 2024 survey. KIIS's (2024b) regular surveys from December 2023 and February 2024 showed broad support for postponing elections until the end of martial law. Lastly, holding elections in only Kyiv-controlled territories during wartime could risk implicitly legitimizing Russian occupation of Ukraine's sovereign territory.

Our motivation is to investigate whether experiences of violence have similar effects across three core principles of democracy. Pairwise correlation tests (Table 1) indicate weak correlations among these principles, with the strongest correlation between freedom of speech and minority rights; the weakest, between minority rights and free and fair elections. These correlations, the structure of which we explore further in Online Appendix A2, suggest that the main distinguishing dimensions of democracy we capture are opposition/competition (free and fair elections) and civil liberties (freedom of speech and protection of minority rights). The weak correlations underscore the importance of disaggregating the concept of democracy.

To evaluate how experiences of violence shape these views, we run a series of linear regression models, first pooling the 2022 and 2024 survey data (controlling for survey year), before analysing each year separately. All analyses apply survey weights.<sup>10</sup> The models include oblast (district) fixed effects (of respondents' oblast prior to the invasion), and control for socio-demographic variables (age, gender, education, income), as well as whether the respondents opted to conduct the interview in Russian – Russian-speakers being the largest minority group in Ukraine and an ethnic kin group of the

**Table 2.** Modelling support for core democratic principles in Ukraine, employing linear regression models.

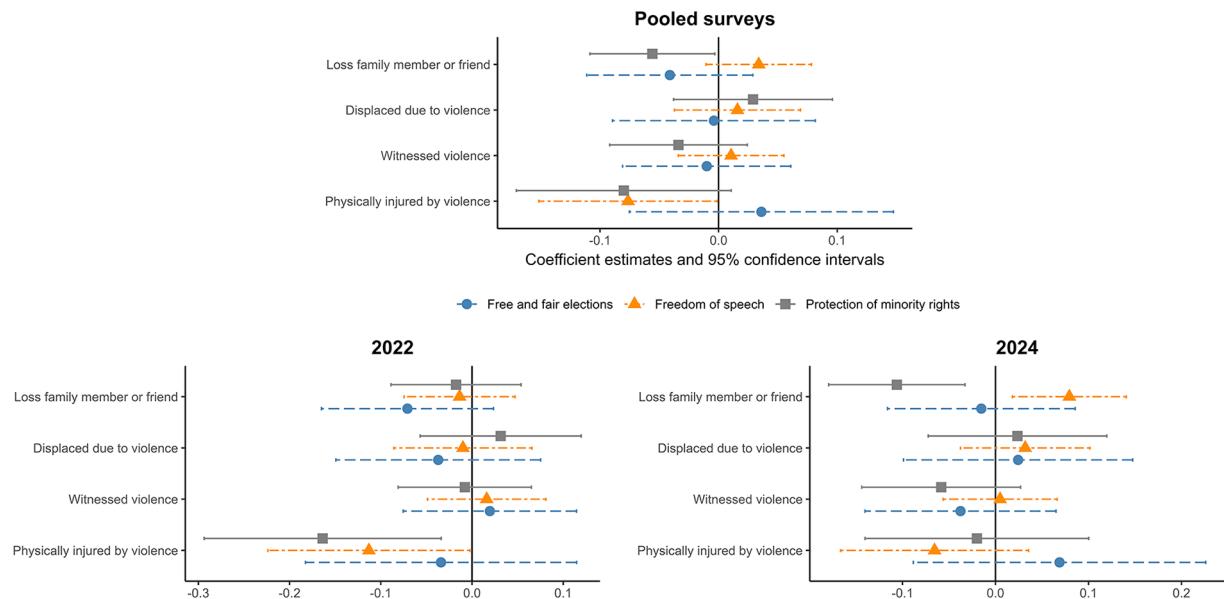
	<i>Free elections</i>	<i>Freedom of speech</i>	<i>Protection of minority rights</i>
Intercept	2.56*** (0.15)	2.51*** (0.09)	2.50*** (0.10)
Physically injured by violence	0.04 (0.06)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.08 <sup>†</sup> (0.05)
Witnessed violence	-0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)
Displaced due to violence	-0.00 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Loss family member or friend	-0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.02)	-0.06* (0.03)
Russian interview	0.22*** (0.05)	0.08** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)
Age	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Gender (female)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.06** (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)
Education	-0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Income	-0.03 <sup>†</sup> (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)
2024 survey	0.08* (0.04)	0.11*** (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)
Deviance	3,024.53	1,267.22	1,754.50
Dispersion	0.77	0.31	0.46
Num. obs.	3,943	4,114	3,819

Models include oblast-fixed effects.

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , <sup>†</sup> $p < 0.10$ .

aggressor state. When the respondents were contacted by KIIS, the interview proceeded in Russian or Ukrainian based on the language in which the respondent greeted the interviewer. Language is often used as a measure of ethnic identity, which is how we use this question here.<sup>11</sup>

Table 2 shows the pooled analysis, and the top plot in Figure 4 visualizes the results for our key independent variables of interest, experiences of violence. Similar plots in Figure 4's bottom row visualizes the analyses for 2022 and 2024 separately (tables in Online Appendix A6).



**Figure 4.** Results of a series of linear regression models with people's perceptions of ensuring/safeguarding three democratic principles as outcome variables.

The top plot shows the pooled analysis. The bottom row shows replication for the 2022 sample (left) and 2024 sample (right). Points indicate whether the relationship between variables capturing exposure to violence are negatively or positively associated with a specific democratic principle. Horizontal lines represent the confidence intervals of our estimates.

The article's headline finding is that experiences of wartime violence – specifically losing a family member or close friend and personal injury – are associated with individuals' views on ensuring the protection of minority rights. By contrast, these experiences are not systematically related to attitudes toward safeguarding free and fair elections. Table 2 reports a negative and statistically significant association between personal injury and commitment to ensuring freedom of speech, but this finding appears less robust and more sensitive to model specification, and varies across years. Although the association between experiences of violence and minority rights also varies across years (and the association between physical injury and views on minority rights is significant only at 0.1 in the pooled analysis),<sup>12</sup> the variation for freedom of speech is more pronounced. Figure 4 illustrates that in 2022, there is a negative association between being physically injured at the hands of Russian troops and people's views on safeguarding both the protection of minority rights and freedom of speech. By 2024, losing a family member or close friend – which, by then, more than half of respondents had experienced – correlates negatively with attitudes toward protecting minority rights but positively with views on ensuring freedom of speech. In sum, across our main findings and alternative model specifications (see below and appendices), *the most consistent result is that specific experiences of violence are negatively associated with people's commitment to ensuring the protection of minority rights*.

The underpinning mechanism in many arguments about why violence would affect democracy is its polarizing effect, deepening – or even creating – divisions between in-groups and out-groups (Proposition 1). This aligns with our finding that experiences of violence are negatively associated with support for ensuring the protection of minority rights in the midst of war. While this logic may hold irrespective of who the out-group is, in this context, the out-group most salient to the majority population, Ukrainian-speakers, is likely Russian-speakers – given their status as the largest minority group and Russia's role as the aggressor. Debates at the time of our surveys may have further heightened this salience. For instance, in November 2022, Kyiv City Council voted to exclude Russian-language teaching in schools to limit Russian influence and avoid tension (*Kyiv Post*, 2022), and in August 2024, parliament adopted a law encouraging religious organizations to break ties with the Russian state (Dysa and Harmash, 2024). A breakdown of our sample into Russian- and Ukrainian-speakers (Online Appendix A8), suggests that the negative effect on minority rights is driven by Ukrainian-speakers, but the smaller sample size of Russian-speakers warrants caution in interpreting this result. What is clear, though, is that Ukrainian-speakers who have borne high personal costs of war, such as physical injury or the loss of family members or close friends, are less inclined to support the protection of minority

rights in the midst of war. Our analysis does not tell us whether this pertains specifically to Russian-speakers' rights or minority rights in general. KIIS's (2024a) polls show a dramatic shift in Ukrainians' views toward protecting the Russian language since the full-scale invasion. That, combined with events at the time our surveys, suggest that the negative correlation is about the rights of Russian-speakers.

A question raised by our findings is why experiences of violence do not yield a more consistent negative association to ensuring freedom of speech, as Proposition 2 suggests. A plausible explanation lies in the framing of the question, which addresses freedom of speech as a general principle, applied to everyone and not a specific group. Yet it is possible that respondents consider their own (or their in-group's) freedom of speech separate to that of the out-group(s). Wartime discussions in Ukraine have underscored the need for restrictions on freedom of speech to counter Russian propaganda and sustain morale. Yet, because freedom of speech directly affects respondents and their in-group as well, the issue is more complex. This duality, which is an avenue for future research, may account for the absence of a systematic, unidirectional effect of wartime violence on commitments to freedom of speech.

In contrast, the lack of a systematic effect with respect to support for ensuring free and fair elections aligns with the fact that the theoretical expectations go in both directions – existing literature highlights mechanisms through which experiences of violence can influence attitudes to elections in both negative (Proposition P3a) and positive (Proposition P3b) directions – potentially neutralizing each other.

As noted above, all of our measures for violence reflect direct experiences, and it is difficult to rank these by severity, as each has the potential to inflict deep trauma. Yet, the most consistent findings across model specifications pertain to being physically injured by Russian troops oneself and having experienced the loss of a family member or friend. These individuals may have felt the external threat the most intensely, which likely heightens in-group/out-group differentiation that, in turn, shapes their views on minority rights.

### *Alternative model specifications*

We present several supplementary analyses in the Online Appendices (A3–A10), to complement the main analyses and assess robustness. We rerun the main analyses without survey weights (A3), introduce step-wise violence measures (A4), and examine the effect of experiencing violence between the two survey waves (A5).

These analyses all suggest that the main finding is that experiences of violence have negative implications for views on protecting minority rights. We also run the analyses separately for 2022 and 2024 (A6), as discussed above. In A7, we control for whether respondents are geopolitically oriented toward Russia or the West and whether they trust Zelensky (both Western-orientation and Zelensky approval may positively shape views on protecting democratic principles). In A8, we run the split sample analyses, as referred to above. In A9, we explore the role of civic identity, though due to measurement challenges, the analyses cannot adequately distinguish ethnic versus civic identity. Finally (A10), we address concerns regarding causal identification by utilizing a matching strategy. Across these analyses, the main interpretation of our results remains, providing confidence in the negative association between certain experiences of violence and commitment to ensuring the protection of minority rights.

## **Conclusion**

Existing research suggests that wars can precipitate democratic as well as autocratic regime transitions. In parallel, a growing body of research investigates how experiences of violence can (re)shape individuals' political attitudes, including their commitment to democracy. Democracy is a broad concept, and by specifying that violence may impact *different* democratic principles in *different* ways, our article offers a nuanced perspective. It is based on telephone surveys conducted in government-controlled areas of Ukraine in October 2022 and July 2024. It shows that even during times of war, there is strong commitment to the protection of minority rights and freedom of speech, but our analyses also suggest that support for protecting minority rights is diminished by experiences such as losing family members and close friends and attacks by Russian troops. Respondents express a more cautious stance regarding the holding of free and fair elections, likely attributed to the formidable challenges associated with conducting elections during wartime, but these attitudes are not shaped by experiences of violence. Combined, our findings suggest that while wartime violence does not wholly erode support for democratic principles, certain experiences of violence can diminish the depth of commitment to inclusivity.

This is a cause of concern, but it also offers a degree of optimism. A more pessimistic scenario would be that experiences of violence lead to the erosion of support for democratic principles across the board. Violence, even widespread violence as in Ukraine, does not seem to

signal a collapse of democratic ideals, which – in terms of worries about democratic backsliding after war – would make it harder for any potential less-democratically inclined leaders to exploit wartime disruptions to consolidate power. This commitment to democratic values, even in the midst of war, reflects the country's democratic resilience.

Our surveys, like most conducted in wartime Ukraine, were not carried out in active combat zones; hence experiences of attacks are under-reported. As the war continues, more individuals will experience violence – indeed, as evidenced in shifts in responses from 2022 to 2024. Further research is crucial, both during the ongoing conflict and in its aftermath, to track how the toll of war continues to shape individuals' commitment to democracy and understand how the war might fuel intergroup polarization, especially considering that the largest minority group is Russians. The findings from this wartime study supports the view that, when the day comes, post-war democracy reconstruction and societal rebuilding in Ukraine will benefit from recognizing and protecting its diverse society (e.g. Couch, 2022). These insights are critical for both domestic and international actors, be those governments or civil society, engaged in ensuring a resilient democratic future for Ukraine.

The article also holds broader implications. For practical and ethical reasons, little systematic research exists on attitudes towards democratic principles during wartime. Hence, we know little (to nothing) about the relationship between wartime and postwar attitudes to democracy and the conditions under which wartime dampening effects, like the one we observe here, persist. Future research should consider whether and how some democratic principles, such as minority rights, are more 'at risk' in some conflict settings rather than others. We study an interstate war in which the wartime enemy is associated with the largest minority group in the country, making minority rights particularly salient. Possibly the findings from such a setting would travel not only to related interstate war settings but also civil wars that pit identity groups against one another (much of the literature we draw on is from such settings). Ukraine is also a setting in which defending democracy is central to the conflict and where democracy was consolidating. The resilience observed may be weaker in settings where democracy was more fragile at the outset. Further research across different wartime contexts is needed to explore the generalizability of our findings. When and where feasible, such research can help enhance understanding of both the immediate challenges that wars pose to democracy and democratic resilience in the

aftermath of war – insights that can help guide policy responses.

## Replication data

Replication files, along with the Online Appendices, are available at <http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets>.

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## Declaration of conflicting interests

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## Notes

1. We recognize that liberal democracy comprises additional principles. Diamond (1999) identifies at least ten, including, in addition to 'our' three, an independent judiciary, checks and balances, rule of law, civilian control over the military, legal equality. The three principles we focus on capture core dimensions of democracy and are relatively concrete. Our surveys – which included questions about the war, geopolitics, and domestic politics – were conducted over the phone in wartime, requiring that we limit the number of questions.

2. This is possibly also reflected in a reduction in self-reported Russian-speakers in Ukraine (Kulyk, 2023).
3. Data from 2022 and 2023 indicate that neither Ukrainian- nor Russian-speakers believe there is language-based oppression (KIIS, 2023). Longitudinal data since the 1990s reveal support for Russian as a second official language (KIIS, 2024a), but this changed after the full-scale invasion.
4. If pro-social effects are confined to the in-group, they may exacerbate the negative impact of experiences of violence on attitudes to minority rights (Proposition 1).
5. More on the surveys in Online Appendix A1. IRB/ethics approval and data protection registration at University College London, University of Colorado, Boulder, and the Norwegian Data Protection Authority.
6. This does not imply that valuable insights into democratic resilience cannot be gained by such measures (e.g. Claassen, 2020).
7. The Ukrainian wording of our question is, 'Чи згодні Ви з тим, що під час війни з Росією в Україні необхідно забезпечити: Вільні та чесні вибори/Свободу слова/Захист прав меншин'. The Russian wording of the question is, 'Согласны ли Вы с тем, что во время войны с Россией в Украине необходимо обеспечить: Свободные и честные выборы/Свободу слова/Защиту прав меньшинств'. The most direct translation is 'do you agree that during the war with Russia, it necessary to ensure in Ukraine: free and fair elections/freedom of speech/protection of minority rights'. We note that our theoretical interest is people's commitment to ensuring/safeguarding these principles, without specifying whose responsibility it is to do so.
8. Even our question about witnessing violence is about personally witnessing violence and goes beyond awareness via TV or social media.
9. Using a broader question, Alexseev and Dembitskyi (2024b) also find consistency across survey waves in 2022 and 2023. In response to 'Do you consider Ukraine's development as a democracy important to you personally?', 50–60% responded 'very important' and about 25–40%, 'mostly important'. While not directly comparable, the pattern is consistent with our findings on freedom of speech, slightly less so for minority rights but in the same direction, and not for free and fair elections.
10. It is common practice to weight surveys by demographics such as age, gender, race, and income. If the sample's demographics do not align with those of the population, weighting can make results more representative. While the demographics employed by KIIS to weight surveys were collected in December 2021 and may not capture the large-scale population displacement caused by war, we employ weights because most reported statistics do so.
11. Onuch and Hale (2008) argue that different measures capture related yet separate dimensions of ethnic identity. Speaking a language at home, in this case Russian,

captures what they call 'language embeddedness', which may be associated with views shared through networks of others speaking that language.

12. The injury–minority rights link is not significant in 2024, nor is the loss of a family member or friend in 2022, though the direction of the coefficient is consistent across years.

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