



# Perceptions of Peace in Times of War: Public Opinion Evidence from Ukraine

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## Abstract

Peace settlements are often an elite pact, especially in interstate conflicts, yet public support is important for the stability of peace. However, we know little about what peace means to individuals during times of war. Using the salient case of Ukraine, this article explores how citizens define peace using an original survey of 2,100 respondents, fielded in the government-controlled parts of Ukraine in August 2023, during the war. The findings show that at the baseline many people think of peace in positive and personal terms, distinct from the hegemonic view of peace through victory. Drawing on social identity theory, an experimental test shows that priming for both the

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in-group and the out-group moves people to peace linked to and secured by a military victory. A key driver is the threat from the enemy out-group. The findings show the importance of framing for public perceptions of peace.

## Keywords

peace – negotiations – territory – victory – Ukraine – Russian war in Ukraine – conflict termination

## Introduction

The Russian aggression against Ukraine is marked by intricate complexities and escalating tensions.<sup>3, 4</sup> These dynamics and the prevailing level of hostility between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, as well as between the Russian Federation and the West, pose significant challenges in achieving a viable political settlement. Ukraine's desire for the full restoration of its territorial integrity, in accordance with its 1991 borders, stands in stark contrast to Russia's demands for recognition of its annexations (Ash et al. 2023). This divergence makes envisioning any mutually-satisfactory negotiation process difficult. The hegemonic view, strongly promoted by President Zelensky, is that peace can only be achieved through victory, which will allow Ukraine to dictate the terms of any settlement (Kyselova & Landau 2025).

In this context, we focus on how Ukrainians view peace and carry out two explorations. Firstly, we seek to understand what citizens mean when they envision peace. Such a focus is sometimes seen as controversial within Ukrainian society (see Kyselova 2019), with activists noting that “in some social groups,

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4 The data and code underpinning this analysis are available at the Harvard Dataverse, DOI 10.7910/DVN/UOMR44. For further details on the research methodology, please see Appendix available on this journal's website — [www.brill.com/iner](http://www.brill.com/iner) — in the supplementary materials section.

any talk about peacebuilding would sound like surrender”<sup>5</sup> or it is “like a traitor position, so we need only victory and not peace”.<sup>6</sup> In such a context, it is important to access citizens’ own understandings of peace in order to see to what extent people align with or differ from the dominant view of peace through military solutions. Our first research question is what peace means to Ukrainian citizens and we access public opinions through an original survey that contains an open-ended question asking what peace means to them.<sup>7</sup> To our knowledge, this is the first exploration of a free description of peace, compared to surveys that ask about specific concessions. The inductive coding allows us to create disaggregated categories of peace that are grouped into military, socio-political, and personal peace for analysis.

Our first finding based on the open-ended question reveals that a large proportion of people do not align with the hegemonic view of peace through military victory, but rather see peace in personal and lived terms. This finding contrasts with other surveys that stress the desire to defend Ukraine “at all costs” (Dill et al. 2023) and suggests that the public is consciously or sub-consciously rejecting the dominant narrative. The result also indicates the advantages of asking an open-ended question, which can reveal answers missed by other surveys.

The second step in the study is to carry out an experimental test of possible motors of the hegemonic view to reveal insights on what aspects of peace are considered most important in different circumstances. Drawing on social identity theory and the development of parochialism in war (Choi & Bowles 2007; Sambanis et al. 2012; Tajfel & Turner 1979), our second research question is how flexible the views of peace are, which can inform the prospects for any future negotiations. Parochialism suggests that respondents will align with the interests of their in-group and reject those of the out-group. However, the effect on the meaning of peace has not been studied. Is the effect seen across all aspects of peace, and does the in-group or out-group have the strongest effect? We use a priming experiment with pre-registered hypotheses embedded in the survey and our treatments are negotiations endorsed by Zelensky, which primes for the in-group, and negotiations endorsed by Putin, which primes for the out-group of Russia as the enemy state.

The second set of findings shows that the primes spark a significant shift to the hegemonic view of seeing peace through military means. We argue that this is because the prospect of negotiations hardens respondents’ views into

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5 Interview with female peace activist, online, 12 January 2023.

6 Interview with female academic and peace activist, online, 20 January 2023.

7 The survey was conducted by IPSOS in the government-controlled areas of Ukraine in August 2023 and had 2,100 respondents.

zero-sum thinking and leads them to focus on core issues. The effect is symmetrical across the primes of both the in-group and the out-group. We also find there are no differential effects by war experiences, which we consider due to the widespread impact of the war throughout society, in other words everyone feels victimized. The primes also generate a reduction in people perceiving peace in personal terms, and here the effect is asymmetrical, with animus to the out-group having the strongest effect.

As a third investigation, we contrast the previous examination of reactions on the meaning of peace with views on a specific concession, territory, which can be seen as indivisible (Atran & Axelrod 2008; Goddard 2006; Hassner 2009; Toft 2003). Confirming this view, positions are rigid and there is no effect from the primes, showing “static and militant attitudes” (Canetti et al. 2017: 737).

We make contributions to a number of literatures in this article. To the conflict resolution literature, we add rich descriptive understandings of what people mean when they think of peace, drawn from citizens in the midst of a “hot” conflict. We inductively conceptualize these into a number of informative categories (Military Peace, Socio-Political Peace, and Personal Peace) and show how these can be tested to reveal insights on what aspects of peace are considered most important in different circumstances. We consider that these categories capture relevant concepts that can be generalized to other conflicts. To the negotiation literature, we bring a rigorous experimental test with high internal validity of how the prospect of in-group or out-group originated negotiations impacts understandings of peace and support for concessions. We show that negotiations focus citizens’ perspectives onto interpretations of peace through victory, regardless of whether the initiator of negotiations is from the in-group or out-group. This result shows that there is flexibility on how peace can be interpreted and this interpretation of peace is transformed when the prospect of negotiations is made salient. While these views are taken from a specific moment in the Russian war in Ukraine, the need for salience can be generalized beyond that circumstance and we thus inform the literature on how framing affects conflict preferences by extending this to peace preferences (Canetti et al. 2017; Corstange & York 2018). The contrast with the reactions to a specific concession (step 3) shows that making an issue salient can make attitudes rigid and close down room within the negotiating space.

The findings can also inform policy as the prevalence of conceptualizing peace in personal terms shows the importance of such framings for people. While the hegemonic view is grounded in a militaristic interpretation (peace through victory) it may be useful to frame peace in future-orientated and positive ways as these resonate deeply with people.

The article proceeds as follows. The first part lays out the previous literature on how peace has been conceptualized. The second part summarizes the literature of social identity theory and war and specifies our theoretical framework on how the prospect of negotiations by the in-group or out-group impacts views of peace and concessions and lays out our experimental expectations. We then describe the research design. We subsequently present the inductive findings on the meaning of peace, followed by the experimental findings on how the primes impact our inductive peace categories, and then conclude.

### Understandings of Peace

The first question we ask is what citizens mean when they think about peace. This question responds to a long-standing area of discussion within the literature of defining peace. A seminal definition of peace distinguishes between negative peace (the end of fighting) and positive peace (changes in society) (Galtung 1969; 2011). More recently, attempts have been made to be more specific in defining peace, with calls for new theoretical frameworks and analytical approaches (Davenport et al. 2018; Diehl 2016; Høglund & Kovacs 2010; Jarstad et al. 2019). As Söderström, Åkebo and Jarstad (2021: 484) state, “scholars have long recognized that peace is more than the absence of war, yet questions still remain as to how to appropriately define and study the phenomenon of peace.” A framework developed by Jarstad et al. (2019) distinguishes peace into three approaches – situational, relational, and ideational. The situational approach conceptualizes peace as a “structural, institutional and aggregated societal phenomenon” (Jarstad et al. 2019: 6); the relational approach focuses on actors and the relations between former combatants, for example, states and non-state armed groups; the ideational approach focuses on ideas about peace. This article adopts the ideational approach in order to examine citizens’ understandings of what peace can be in the future. The ideational approach argues that ideas should be considered as a source of motivations that is separate from other drivers such as material forces. Such ideas have power to influence support for particular decisions and action, as they are used as a guide to whether the action will be helpful in achieving the desired state. The idea of what peace is affects “what actions [people] legitimize with [peace]” (Klem 2018: 236) and is used “as a political tool to legitimize certain agendas, pursue particular forms of change or stability, and reshape or reify existing relations of power” (Jarstad et al. 2019: 13). Thus, ideas are an essential component to understanding politics, peace, and conflict.

Understanding what citizens mean by ‘peace’ is ripe for exploration in Ukraine. For the majority of Ukrainians, the hegemonic view of peace is intrinsically linked to victory (Dill et al. 2023; Kyselova & Landau 2025), as the alternative is not viewed as a compromise but rather as the capitulation of Ukraine. This perspective stems from a widespread belief among both the Ukrainian political elite and the general populace that the primary objective of Russian aggression transcends any of Russia’s publicly stated goals of the war against Ukraine (which have notably shifted multiple times since February 2022). The predominant view is that Russia’s true aim is the complete dismantling of Ukrainian sovereignty (Ash et al. 2023). Given this understanding of the existential threat posed by military defeat, support for victory is steadfast. Surveys uphold this view, showing a positive outlook among 87 percent of the population at the end of 2023, remarkably similar to earlier levels in 2022.<sup>8</sup>

Prior surveys ask about views on specific issues such as victory, territorial concessions, et cetera, but, to our knowledge, no survey has allowed an open-ended option for respondents to define peace as they see it most relevant to them. The first part of the study therefore inductively explores what peace means to the people of Ukraine at the particular moment of the survey.

### **The Impact of In-Group and Out-Group Initiated Negotiations**

The second part of the study tests how perceptions of peace change under different circumstances. The theoretical framework draws on social identity theory (Brewer 1979; Tajfel 1974) to examine the impact of affect towards one’s in-group and animus towards the out-group. Such attitudes (parochialism) increase with conflict (Bakke et al. 2009; Beber et al. 2014; Choi & Bowles 2007; Sambanis et al. 2012), and result in a wider gap between the groups that is harder to reconcile (Bakke et al. 2009; Tajfel & Turner 1979). In war, the enemy is a clear out-group (Bar-tal et al. 2007; Brewer 1999) and the enemy is seen as a threat and a danger to the in-group. Conflict experiences lead to increased animus towards the out-group (Lyall et al. 2013) and a rejection of the perpetrator’s ideology (Balcells 2012), and individuals with greater threat perceptions are less tolerant and seek harsher punishments against out-groups (Beber et al. 2014; Hetherington & Suhay 2011). In Ukraine, the war has increased views of Russia as an out-group. The share of Ukrainians who consider optimal relations with Russia to be friendly has decreased drastically with the majority

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Kyiv International Institute for Sociology (2023c), and previous surveys on the same question by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology.

seeing Russia as an enemy (Kyiv International Institute for Sociology 2023b). There has been a shift away from pro-Russian or pro-Soviet views, particularly in eastern and southern regions, which have been heavily impacted by Russian aggression (Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation 2023).

Animus towards the out-group can also make negotiations more difficult (Canetti et al. 2017). Negotiations are less likely to happen in cases that are complex, violent, and high-stakes (Butler 2019), and so the public are less likely to be supportive of efforts in such circumstances.

We therefore expect that views of the out-group as a threat heighten the significance of peace. We argue that this effect can impact the understanding of what peace means, making individuals more likely to think of negative peace (Galtung 1969; 2011) and see peace through military means. These reactions will be particularly strong among those who have experienced worse conflict experiences.

These considerations lead to our first hypothesis:

H1a: Endorsement by the war-time enemy leads to increased focus on negative (military) peace.

H1b: Endorsement by the war-time enemy leads to increased focus on negative (military) peace among victims.

We turn next to the test of in-group effect. War increases in-group identification and a sense of a unified population (Bar-tal et al. 2007; Brewer 1999; Kertzer & Brutger 2016). Ukraine already did not align with the Russian-promoted narrative of a shared past (Bakke 2023), and Russia's large-scale aggression in 2022 fundamentally shifted Ukrainian attitudes towards sense of national identity (Kyiv International Institute for Sociology 2023b). The ongoing conflict has significantly bolstered a sense of patriotism in Ukraine, with a large growth in attachment to the Ukrainian state (Onuch & Hale 2022). The proportion of Ukrainians proud of their citizenship rose from 59 percent in 2020 to 89 percent in August 2023 (Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation 2023). The Ukrainian defense against Russia has galvanized the Ukrainian population, transcending regional, linguistic, and cultural differences that previously marked the country's societal landscape (Wilson 2023). This increased sense of patriotism is a reaction to external aggression, but also demonstrates a stronger sense of in-group effect (Barrington 2021; Kulyk 2023).

In-group affect generates increased pro-sociality, resulting in more civic engagement and political participation, creating more pro-group cohesion (Barceló 2021; Bauer et al. 2016; Blattman 2009; Gilligan & Pasquale 2014). These results extend to those who have been victimized (Bauer et al. 2016). Thus, we further argue that the increased in-group identification leads to a

desire to improve the conditions of the nation. We argue that this effect can impact the understanding of what peace means, leaning towards a future-orientated, reforming, positive peace (Galtung 1969; 2011).

The Ukrainian society, while rallying behind their leader in the face of external threats, is also increasingly vocal about the need for internal societal reforms. There is a growing consensus that post-conflict Ukraine should not only focus on rebuilding its infrastructure and economy but also on strengthening democratic institutions, combating corruption, and ensuring the rule of law (Alexseev & Dembitskyi 2024). Support for democracy as the preferred form of government, perceived as increasingly beneficial for ordinary Ukrainians, surged from 41 percent in April 2019 to 94 percent in May 2023 (just before our survey) (Kyiv International Institute for Sociology 2023d). This shift in public opinion suggests that the war has not only been a battle for territorial integrity but also a catalyst for a broader transformation within Ukrainian society, aiming for a more democratic, transparent, and resilient state (Alexseev & Dembitskyi 2024; Wilson 2023).

These considerations lead to our second hypothesis:

H2: The prospect of negotiations proposed by the war-time leader leads to increased focus on positive peace and changes to society.

In a third investigation, we move away from the meaning of peace in the abstract to a concrete, specific concession: territory. We expect that when faced with a specific choice respondents are less flexible to the impact of different primes. Territory is seen as indivisible (Atran & Axelrod 2008; Goddard 2006; Hassner 2009; Toft 2003). This is reflected in the stance by the public that they are prepared to pay “any cost” (Dill et al. 2023) and the strong societal resistance within Ukraine to any form of territorial concession (Dill et al. 2023; Toal & Korostelina 2022). Our expectations are therefore that support for this concession does not change across the in-group or out-group prime.

### Negotiations in Ukraine

The history of negotiations between Ukraine and Russia is complex and dates back to the Russian annexation of Crimea and covert military operation in the Donbas region in 2014. The first significant negotiation culminated in the Minsk Protocol. The negotiations involved representatives from Ukraine and Russia, as well as members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), with leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics present unofficially. The broader diplomatic framework in-



cluded Germany and France, which, along with Ukraine and Russia, formed the Normandy Format, a diplomatic group aimed at resolving the conflict. The first Minsk agreement was signed on September 5, 2014, after heavy losses of Ukrainian army on the battlefield. This agreement included a ceasefire, the withdrawal of illegal military formations, and the establishment of a security zone in the conflict regions. The Protocol was initially intended to de-escalate the conflict in Eastern Ukraine but it ultimately failed to deliver the intended results, largely due to Russia's actions that contradicted the agreement's terms (Allan 2020; Umland & von Essen 2023). The ceasefire was frequently violated, and fighting did not stop (Polishchuk & Holcomb 2020).

Due to the continued conflict and breakdown of the initial Minsk Protocol, a new round of negotiations was held, leading to the Minsk 11 agreement, signed on February 12, 2015. This agreement was more comprehensive than its predecessor and included provisions for a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weapons, and full control of the state border by the Ukrainian government by the end of 2015. It also outlined steps for the decentralization of power in Donetsk and Luhansk and the holding of local elections under Ukrainian law. Despite the agreement, fighting in the region continued, and there were numerous instances of ceasefire violations attributed to Russian-backed forces (Czuperski et al. 2015). Russia's covert military involvement and support for separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine, and the failure to ensure effective control over the border, allowed the conflict to persist and even escalate at times. This created a situation where Ukraine was negotiating under continuously adverse conditions, with its territorial integrity and sovereignty being consistently undermined.

The primary issue in the Minsk Accord negotiations has been the inability of either side to propose a plan acceptable to the other. Ukraine, bearing the brunt of the conflict's negative consequences, has made significant efforts to re-launch aspects of the Minsk Process (Polegkyi & Stepniewski 2020), especially humanitarian components. However, these efforts have not yielded substantial results. Also, the idea of introducing a UN peacekeeping mission, although discussed for several years, has not materialized into a viable solution (Filipchuk et al. 2017). The last meeting in the Normandy format, held on December 9, 2019, in Paris, did not bring the sides closer to a resolution.

For Ukraine, implementing the political provisions of the Minsk Agreements as envisioned by Russia would have severely limited its sovereignty, an outcome that is untenable for the large segment of Ukrainian society that is committed to an independent Ukraine. Allan (2020: 1) aptly summarized this dilemma, noting that while Ukraine viewed the Minsk Process as a chance to restore its sovereignty, Russia saw it as an opportunity to curtail this sovereignty. Implementation of the Minsk agreements on Russian terms would have left

Donbas under de facto Russian control, but Ukraine would have been unable to govern itself effectively or orient itself towards the West (Åtland 2020). On the other hand, Russia had reached a limit in its ability to pressure Ukraine but could not accept peace with Donbas under Ukrainian control, as this would have been perceived as a sign of weakness by President Vladimir Putin. While some aspects of the agreement were partially implemented, including temporary ceasefires and prisoner exchanges, most were not and low-level conflict endured, with more than 300,000 ceasefire violations each year following the agreement (Åtland 2020). The failure of the Minsk agreements has been attributed to underlying security tensions including Russian imperialism (Mälksoo 2022), U.S. expansionism and the pan-European security context, along with inability to credibly commit to peace (D'Anieri 2023). Some saw the situation as “destined to deadlock” (Åtland 2020). On February 22, 2022, Putin stated that “the Minsk agreements do not exist any more” and invaded Ukraine two days later (cited in D'Anieri 2023: 257).

A further aborted negotiating process began only days after the invasion in February 2022, seemingly driven by the Russian failures on the battlefield. Among key issues for Russia was neutral status for Ukraine, while for Ukraine it was security guarantees against future aggression (Charap & Radchenko 2024). Russian and Ukrainian negotiators came close to agreement on many of the contentious issues, producing the Istanbul communiqué, which established a framework based on Ukraine as a permanently neutral state, guarantor states that would ensure its security, acceptance of EU accession, and an agreement to negotiate a solution to Crimea, though the definition of the territory of Ukraine had not been touched. However, in mid-April the initiative was abandoned, with plausible reasons that the plans were too ambitious, external backing essential to success was not forthcoming, exposure of Russian atrocities made the Ukrainian public less open to any settlement, and battlefield success encouraged Ukrainians to hold out for victory (Charap & Radchenko 2024).

These challenges continue to influence the dynamics of current negotiations, with Ukraine wary of making concessions that may compromise its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Bramsen & Svensson 2025). For Ukraine, this translates into reinforcing the West's security obligations due to a profound mistrust of the Russian Federation's commitment to any agreements (Åtland 2020; D'Anieri 2025). Despite Moscow's rhetorical assertions of readiness for negotiations, its proposals are seen in Ukraine as necessitating Ukraine's total acquiescence to Russian demands. In this context, discussions about ‘peace’ are often perceived by Ukrainians not as dialogues aimed at achieving genuine peace, but rather as negotiations leading to a form of surrender to Russia

(D'Anieri 2025). Instead, Ukraine proposed a 10-point peace plan as an attempt to build international support for a negotiated end of war (President of Ukraine 2022). This plan implies victory and includes complete withdrawal of Russian forces and the restoration of Ukraine's control over its sovereign territory, plus post-conflict requirements such as justice and the release of prisoners, alongside issues that appeal to the international order and stress the geopolitical importance of Ukraine, such as nuclear, energy, and food security.

Our study explores how the prospect of in-group or out-group initiated negotiations impact visions of peace and the extent to which these meanings of peace are flexible or fixed. This focus moves beyond previous literature on the determinants of support for negotiations.<sup>9</sup> Public perceptions of policy choices can affect people's support for those actions (Kertzer & Brutger 2016) and, given the stakes, there are examples from conflict situations of how the prospect of negotiations can generate heated public reactions. In Northern Ireland and the Israel-Palestine conflict, there were intense public discussions on the legitimacy of whether to negotiate or not (Irwin 2004; Irwin 2006; Montoya & Tellez 2020). How a conflict is framed can change the room for compromise and negotiation (Canetti et al. 2017).

### Research Design

Initial interviews were carried out with a range of academics, peace activists, and NGO staff in order to clarify the concepts and questions.<sup>10</sup> After the survey was designed, further interviews were carried out with a range of Ukrainian citizens, seeking a balance across age, sex, and region of the country, to collect qualitative responses to the topics of the survey.<sup>11</sup> The information gained is used to interpret the results.

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9 For example, victimization (Blattman 2009; Hirsch-Hoefler et al. 2016; Tellez 2019) and support for elites (Berinsky 2007), among others.

10 Further information about the interviews is given in the Research Design in the Appendix. Human subjects research approval was received from Universitat Pompeu, reference UPF-CIREP-273, for both the interviews and the survey prior to the implementation of these activities.

11 Eleven interviews were carried out by the research assistant, in Ukrainian. These interviews were carried out online using a secured connection and also face-to-face. Given the security situation, the face-to-face interviews were carried out only in Lviv, but efforts were made to interview respondents from different parts of Ukraine (e.g. Western Ukraine, Kyiv, Dnipro, and returned refugees).

The expectations are tested in an online survey carried out in government-controlled areas.<sup>12</sup> The survey was delivered to 2,100 Ukrainian residents over 18 years old by IPSOS through its Ukrainian office. The survey company uses soft quotas (with ten percent variance) for age group (18-20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51+), sex (male, female), and region (Central, Eastern, Kyiv, Northern, Southern, Western) based on pre-war census data. Individuals who are not Ukrainian residents at the time of the survey or before the outbreak of the Russian war (24 February 2022) are excluded. Victimization is measured by whether a close friend or family member of the respondent has died. Data collection ran from 10 to 24 August 2023.

A priming experiment that gives an endorsement for peace negotiations is embedded in the survey to test the pre-registered hypotheses.<sup>13</sup> The primes are presented as additional phrases embedded into the introductory sentences for the section. No deception is practiced in the primes, which were based on contemporaneous news stories.<sup>14</sup> The primes are the following:

Finally, we would like to ask you your opinions on some other features of Ukraine's future."

PRIME 1: [No further text: control group]

PRIME 2: "Recently Putin said that he does not reject the idea of peace talks."

PRIME 3: "Recently, Zelensky has been discussing his peace proposal."<sup>15</sup>

The second prime referenced Putin in order to prime for the out-group of Russia as the enemy. When the enemy is viewed as a high-level threat, the negoti-

12 Further information about the survey is given in the Appendix. The war-time situation makes inferring representative findings outside of war conditions extremely difficult (Rickard et al. 2023), however, the findings can be considered representative of a population that has endured 18 months of war.

13 Respondents are allocated to one of the primes by block randomization, using quotas on age band, sex, and region. Respondents are allocated equally, so that each prime is seen by as close to 700 respondents as possible. The hypotheses were pre-registered at the Open Science Foundation.

14 The prime referring to President Zelensky draws on Al Jazeera (2023). The prime referring to President Putin draws on the BBC (Moloney 2023). As we relied on specific news stories in order to not practice deception, the wording of the primes cannot be identical.

15 Zelensky's peace plan includes radiation and nuclear safety, food and energy security, the release of prisoners, the implementation of the UN Charter and Ukrainian sovereignty, withdrawal of Russian troops and cessation of hostilities, justice, protection of the environment, security assurances, and confirmation of the end of the war (President of Ukraine 2022).

ating party has no confidence that the enemy will stick to the commitments it makes on post-war behavior (D'Anieri 2025). The enemy is therefore seen as an unreliable negotiation partner. At the time of the survey, only 10 percent of the population thought that it was possible to engage in negotiations with Russia to bring the war to an end (Opora 2023).

The third prime references Zelensky in order to prime for the in-group. A survey from June 2023 revealed that the majority (58 percent) support the president's proposals for peace and there is increasing trust in the president (Opora 2023). We argue this results from a rally-round-the-flag effect towards the leader (Mueller 1970). Such effects are strongest following attacks against a country's security (Murray 2017). Support for Zelensky has shifted from 32 percent expressing strong or somewhat approval in December 2021, prior to the invasion by Russia (Kizilova & Norris 2023), to 91 percent in February 2023 (IRI 2023), and still at a high of near 77 percent at the end of 2023 (Kyiv International Institute for Sociology 2023a). Toal and Korostelina (2022) show in a survey in July 2022 of those living close to the front-line that support for negotiations increased when endorsed by Zelensky.

### *Outcome*

We capture the outcome through an open-ended question that assesses respondents' views of peace. The prompt is as follows: "We would like to ask you what peace would mean to you. Please write 3 words or phrases." The respondents then have space for an open answer and answers ranged from 1 word (repeated) to 78 words.

The responses to this outcome variable were coded by the researcher in an iterative inductive manner. Starting from the deductive categories of negative and positive peace, responses were allocated into themes, which are specified below in the description of what peace means. Each phrase or word was allocated to only one theme, but a respondent might reference more than one theme in their whole answer.<sup>16</sup>

Socio-economic and demographic measures of the age, sex, region lived previously, educational level, and measures of Ukrainian/Russian identity are used in the analysis.<sup>17</sup>

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16 The outcome variable is coded as the proportion that are focused on a particular theme of the total answers.

17 Given the strong shift away from identification as Russian within Ukraine during the war, we take a behavioural measure rather than a self-identification measure of Russian identity and analyze by whether respondents chose to access the survey in the Russian language rather than Ukrainian. The analyses use covariate-adjusted analysis.

### Findings on the meaning of peace

We carried out preliminary explorations of how citizens viewed peace in 17 qualitative interviews that revealed a wide range of views.<sup>18</sup> At one extreme were those who saw peace not only as victory but the complete destruction of Russia, for example, “the collapse of the Russian Federation – it should not exist in principle, it should break up into small federations.”<sup>19</sup> However, the qualitative interviews also revealed that some interviewees viewed peace in a more personal way, for example, “peace is an opportunity to sleep peacefully, study peacefully, love and respect each other.”<sup>20</sup>

In the survey, the responses to the open-ended question revealed a wide range of thoughts about peace, many of which do not match the hegemonic view. Figure 1 shows a word cloud of all the responses. This reveals that the most popular word was “peace” itself and references to Ukraine and to Russia were also common. Responses show a mixture of phrases that fit in our categories of militaristic terms, such as “hostility,” “war,” and “troops,” and societal change terms, such as “well-being,” “work,” and “stability,” but also positive emotional terms, such as “calm” and “happiness.”



FIGURE 1 Word cloud of raw responses to the open-ended question “What would peace mean to you?”

- 18 The interviews are described further in Research Design in the Appendix.
- 19 Interview with female translator from Kyiv, Lviv, 18 April 2023. A survey from June 2023 also showed a majority of Ukrainians (68 percent) associate victory with a complete defeat of Russia, leading either to the liberation of all the occupied territories (43 percent) or the collapse of Russia (26 percent) (Opora 2023).
- 20 Interview with male military veteran from Kyiv, online, 5 April 2023.

The responses were categorized inductively first into ten categories, which are now described, and the distribution is shown in Figure 2.<sup>21</sup> Peace through military means includes the category of End War, which denotes any responses that refer to the end of “hot” war. These can be descriptions such as end war, end fighting, end bombing. It is the most mentioned concept within a view of peace through military means and 21 percent of the control group referred to this idea. The second largest concept within peace through military means is Security and 13 percent of the control group mention this feature. The category of Security encompasses any hopes or active calls for Ukraine to be more secure in the future. Responses within the survey include “demilitarized zone of 150 km,” “strengthening air defense, strengthening the Armed Forces,” “joining NATO,” “in the EU,” and “security guarantees of European countries and the USA.” A further concept within peace through military means is Victory. This category encompasses any explicit mention of victory, success on the battlefield, or conquest.<sup>22</sup> This category generates strong responses, such as “complete victory of Ukraine,” “only victory,” “Victory, victory, victory,” “VICTORY OF UKRAINE!!!,” and many responses are only the concept of victory and no other statement. It is mentioned by eight percent of respondents in the control group. The category of Territory also generates strong feelings. This category covers any mention of recovering Ukrainian territory (whether the boundaries are specified or not) the return to previous borders (whether the boundaries are specified or not) clearing the land of Russian troops or driving the troops out of the territory, and liberation.<sup>23</sup> Many responses refer to the Ukrainian borders of 1991, with phrases such as “the entire territory of Ukraine that existed before 2014,” “the liberation of all territories, including Crimea!,” “border of 1991.” Seven percent mention this concept. The final category within peace through military means is Destroy Russia, which captures sentiments that go beyond simply the end of the war in Ukraine, but call for the complete destruction of Russia or the death of Putin.<sup>24</sup> Responses range from concrete suggestions such as a “demilitarized, denuclearized Russian Federation divided into separate independent national

21 Figures 2 and 3 show the distribution of the answers for only the control group. This distribution can be considered more representative of the Ukrainian population because this group is unprimed, with the caveat that the survey itself can only represent the accessible population, as discussed above in Research Design and in the Appendix.

22 Expressions that Russian troops will be driven out of the territory capture the idea of victory, but are coded as Territory.

23 Expressions of territorial integrity are not included in Territory, as the latter is about the return of territory and the restoration of borders while the former is a future-orientated abstract ideal of safety. The former is categorized as Sovereignty.

24 Destroy Russia could also be a form of Security, but it is coded separately.

countries” to radical expressions such as “the absence of Moscow on the world map.” Five percent of the control group express such ideas. In total, 46 percent of the control group endorse peace through military means.

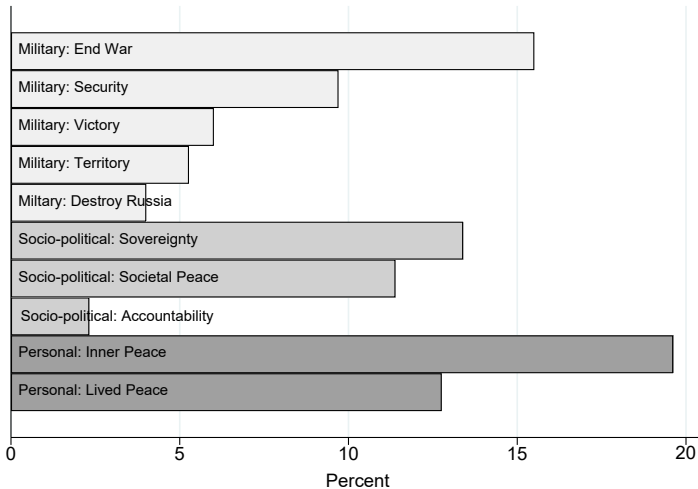


FIGURE 2 Distribution of the ten inductive categories in the control group showing percentage that express that category.

The second broad category is Socio-Political Peace and this covers changes to society and the phrases that refer to the political future. The first category is Sovereignty, which includes any reference to Ukraine as a free, independent, sovereign state with phrases such as “sovereign Ukraine,” “territorial integrity,” “independence,” and “Ukraine is a free state that decides for itself what and how to do.” These concepts are included by 18 percent of respondents in the control group. The second category within Socio-Political Peace is Societal peace, which covers themes such as specific post-war reconstruction or visions for the future. This section contains issues such as the economy, judicial reform, and tackling corruption. Responses from the survey include “the availability of work in Ukraine,” “without corruption,” “true media,” “democratic institutions,” “respecting human rights and freedoms,” “attracting investments for the reconstruction of our state,” and “a quality educational environment.” This category is included by 15 percent of the control group. The final category within Socio-Political Peace is Accountability, which encompasses any calls for reparations, justice, and recognition of crimes, including “the International Court of Justice and the condemnation of the highest political power of Russia!!!” and “bringing the president of the Russian Federation and all the military of the Russian Federation to the International Criminal Court.” While this category generates



strong feelings, only three percent of the control group include these ideas. In total, 30 percent of the control group include socio-political aspects of peace.

The iterative inductive process also revealed two other categories that captured common themes in the responses, which have been coded together as Personal Peace. The first category within Personal peace is Inner Peace, which encompasses emotional or internal aspects of peace. This category includes emotions such as “trust,” “hope,” “peace of mind,” “love,” “calm,” “confidence,” “happiness,” and “joy.” Inner Peace is the single most popular category in the control group, with 27 percent referring to these ideas. A second category of Personal Peace is Lived Peace, which can refer to behaviors, for example “go out freely,” “go out alone;” and it can capture personal priorities, for example “relatives home safely,” “smile on your child.” 17 percent of respondents in the control group included Lived Peace and in total the overarching category of personal peace was referenced by 44 percent of respondents.

These ten categories are grouped into three categories to be used in the analysis, which are Military, Socio-political, and Personal, and the distribution is shown in Figure 3. We see that the most popular understanding of peace is through military means, while a close second is a personal view of peace as something internal or lived. This category of Personal Peace does not match the hegemonic view of peace that has been widely promoted in Ukraine. People appear to be consciously or subconsciously finding a different meaning of peace. An interesting question is how stable these preferences are to different framings, which we turn to in the second part of the study.

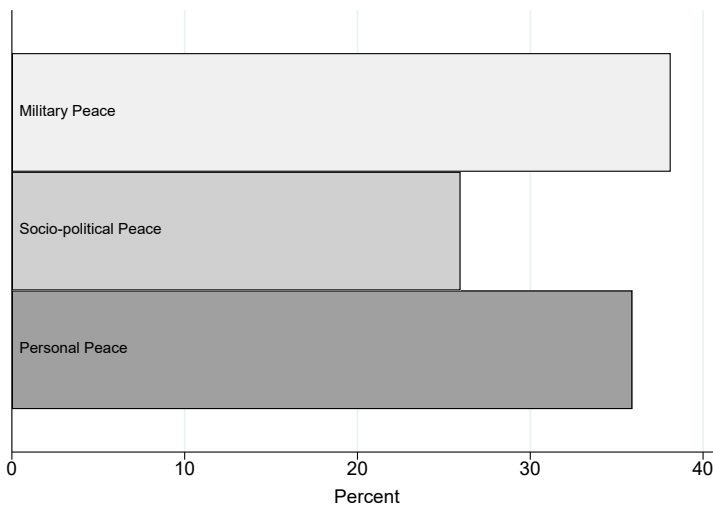


FIGURE 3 Distribution of the three analytical categories in the control group showing the percentage that express that category.

### Findings on the Impact of In-Group and Out-Group Initiated Negotiations

These categories become the dependent variable for the second part of the research. Here, we test the impact of negotiations with experimental primes on Zelensky and Putin's proposals for reaching peace. We show the results with graphs of predictive marginal results. The results for Military Peace are shown in Figure 4.

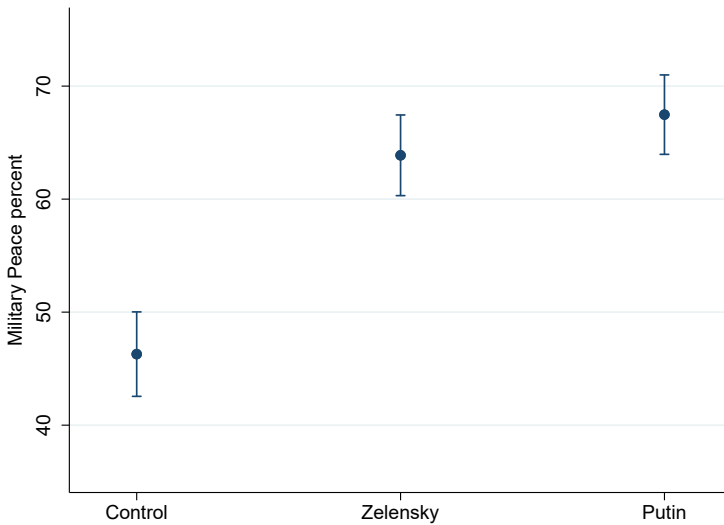


FIGURE 4 Impact of experimental primes on percentage who reference Military Peace.

Our expectation was that the out-group prime would make respondents endorse peace through military means more strongly. The results show that not only the Putin prime had an effect but also the Zelensky prime, as both primes shift respondents significantly towards such a view. There is a symmetrical impact of the primes. Levels move from 46 percent in the control group to 67 percent with the Putin prime and 64 percent with the Zelensky prime. We argue that both primes, by raising the issue of proposals for peace, make salient the notion of concessions and respondents react by endorsing a view of peace that relies on military means. This is because the prospect of negotiations hardens respondents' views into zero-sum thinking, activates priorities and leads them to focus on core issues. This reflects views from the qualitative interviews that showed that people have moved to an uncompromising stance, "There is also a clear understanding that if before it was possible to think about any negotiations, everything was black, grey, and white, now everything is black and white,

and it has remained so. There is no longer any such grey area, no more obscure compromises.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, there is a rejection of negotiations, which are replaced with a desire for victor’s peace of being able to dictate the terms of settlement. As interviewees stated, “for me to accept peace, there must first of all be a military victory,”<sup>26</sup> and “we will not accept any peace, we must win peace. There will be no other peace.”<sup>27</sup> Another said, “negotiations should be conducted after the liberation of all territories, when we have a victory, only then, and not to negotiate anything, but to dictate the terms.”<sup>28</sup>

We further expected conflict experiences and victimization to have a stronger effect on shifting views to military peace. The results show that although victims who see the out-group prime are particularly likely to think of peace in military terms, there are no significant differences between the reactions of victims and non-victims.<sup>29</sup>

Drilling down into the disaggregated categories within Military Peace, the factor that is most affected by the primes is Territory, which has the single most powerful impact on the results.<sup>30</sup> The Putin prime has a dramatic increase in the references to territory to 30 percent compared to the only seven percent in the control group. Territory is strongly associated with victory. For example, “the government is saying all the time, Zelensky is saying there is no alternative, I mean we’re going to liberate all our lands, you know, sooner or later, ... and that’s why a lot of people are like, okay, that’s what’s going to happen.”<sup>31</sup> In light of this, we see that the Zelensky prime also increases references to territory to 19 percent. Territory represents the homeland and generates strong in-group emotions of belonging and security (Penrose 2002; Toft 2003).

The second expectation is that endorsement by the wartime leader leads to increased focus on the future, including social changes and political status. The results for Socio-political Peace are shown in Figure 5.

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25 Interview with female translator from Kyiv, Lviv, 18 April 2023.

26 Interview with male businessman from Western Ukraine, Lviv, 18 April 2023.

27 Interview with male musician from Dnipro, online, 4 July 2023.

28 Interview with female pharmacist from Borodyanka, Lviv, 17 April 2023.

29 The results are shown in Figure A1 in the Appendix.

30 The results for the sub-categories of End War, Security, Victory, Territory and Destroy Russia are shown in Figures A2 to A6 in the Appendix.

31 Interview with male academic, online, 25 January 2023.

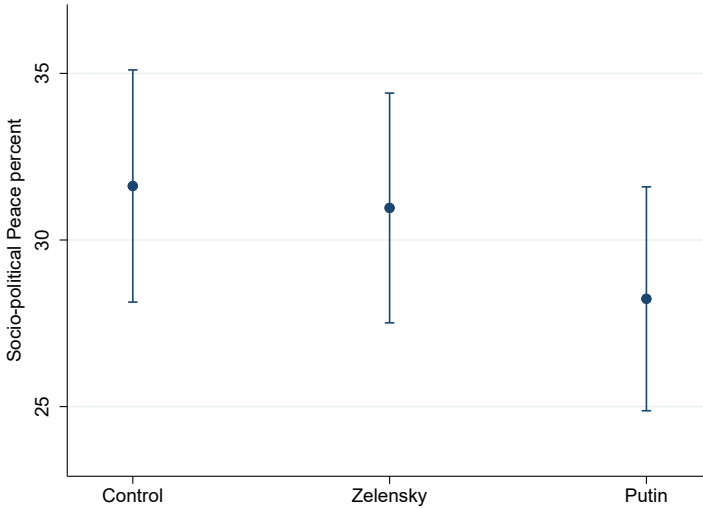


FIGURE 5 Impact of experimental primes on percentage who reference Socio-political Peace.

These results show that counter to our expectation, the in-group prime does not increase references to Socio-political Peace, which are not significantly different from the control. The prime of Putin also does not have any significant effects on the overarching category. This is surprising, because the hypothesis was that an in-group prime would make respondents more orientated towards positive peace bringing social reforms. Rather, the two primes again have a symmetrical impact but with no effect on Socio-political Peace.

Looking at the disaggregated categories within Socio-political Peace adds some nuance to the results.<sup>32</sup> While the Zelensky prime does not have effects on any of the sub-categories, the Putin prime has diverging effects. It significantly reduces references to Societal Peace, reducing the frequency from 15 percent in the control to 8 percent, meaning people are thinking less about improvements to Ukraine. The Putin prime also makes respondents more likely to reference accountability, increasing references from 3 percent to 8 percent. Comments from the interviewees reveal that part of the increase can come from the desire to punish Putin, “peace in the future is when the aggressor is punished,”<sup>33</sup> and part as a way to reduce the threat posed by Russia, “justice is

32 The results for the sub-categories of Sovereignty, Societal Peace, and Accountability are shown in Figures A7-A9 in the Appendix.

33 Interview with female volunteer for international NGO from Kyiv, Lviv, 20 April 2023.

very important. Criminals must be punished according to the law, because this will give us security in the future.”<sup>34</sup>

The final category is Personal Peace, which arose from the inductive categorization and for which we do not have experimental expectations. The results are shown in Figure 6.

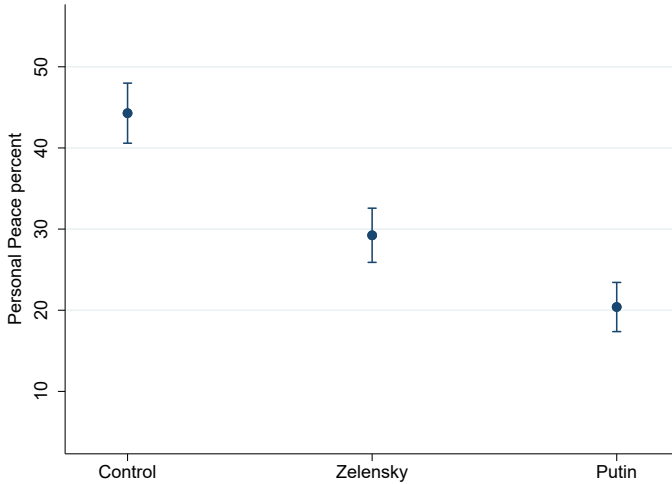


FIGURE 6 Impact of experimental primes on percentage who reference Personal Peace.

These results show that both primes have a significant and strong impact by reducing whether respondents reference personal ideas of peace.<sup>35</sup> The Zelensky prime reduces the frequency from 44 percent to 29 percent and the Putin prime takes the frequency down to 20 percent. Thus, the prospect of negotiations results in respondents being less focused on internal and personal aspects, such as emotions and lived peace. Both the in-group and out-group prime reduce personal interpretations of peace, yet with differing strengths. We see the effects are asymmetrical in this category, with the out-group prime having a much stronger impact than the in-group prime. Although these personal and emotional views of peace are widespread (since this category was referenced by 44 percent of respondents in the control group), they are quickly considered secondary when there is the prospect of hard choices to be made,

34 Interview with female volunteer for international NGO from Kyiv, Lviv, 20 April 2023.

35 The results for the sub-categories of Inner Peace and Lived Peace are shown in Figures A10-A11 in the Appendix.

and the out-group threat has a significantly stronger impact than the in-group effect. This strong change is useful to inform future discussions over Ukraine's future. Indeed, such emotional responses and views of an idyllic peace may be a way for respondents to endure hardship during the war but does not condition their views about how the war should end.

The results on the meaning of peace show that there is flexibility in how people perceive peace and that views can change when negotiations are made salient. To test this further we carry out a third investigation and switch the outcome to a closed question about territory as a concession.<sup>36</sup> Our pre-registered expectations are that when asked about concessions, respondents are less flexible to the impact of different primes. For example, one of the interviewees stated, "Ukraine should remain Ukraine within the borders it had before the war until 2014."<sup>37</sup> We use a list experiment to avoid social desirability responses and the results show that our expectations are fulfilled. Confirming the view of territory as an indivisible issue, positions are rigid and there is no effect from the primes. This rigidity about specific concessions contrasts with the flexibility around the meaning of peace and shows how making an issue salient can close down possibilities in negotiating positions.

## Conclusions

In the midst of war, prospects for peace can seem remote. Ukraine has consistently and clearly stated its position that no peace negotiations with Russia will be possible until the full restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, in accordance with the 1991 borders, while Russia has repeatedly claimed that negotiations will be possible only taking into account the so-called "new realities," that is, Russia's illegal occupation of four southeastern regions of Ukraine and Crimea (see for example Reuters 2024).

In the midst of high-level negotiations, citizens' views are often ignored. Yet it is the people who are fighting for their country and who will have to endorse and live with any settlement. Our study, based on the interviews and survey conducted in August 2023 on Ukraine-controlled territories, reveals a number of interesting insights into citizens' views. Firstly, we reveal an unexpected result that the dominant view in Ukraine of peace through victory is not what primarily comes to mind for a surprising proportion of people. Rather, they think of peace in personal terms.

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36 The test, the design and the results are discussed in detail in Part 5 of the Appendix.

37 Interview with male military from Kyiv, online, 5 April 2023.

However, the public's understanding of peace shifts from personal and emotional terms to a perspective of peace through military means when negotiations are brought into focus. The lack of realistic propositions from Moscow for a compromise, other than Ukraine's total acceptance of Russia's conditions, has led to a prevailing view among Ukrainians that Russian discussions about 'peace' are essentially equated with surrendering to Russia. Meanwhile, the principal positions of Kyiv, expressed in the 10-point peace plan, are predicated on victory. As our results show, any prospect of negotiations, whether initiated by the out-group leader or the in-group leader, intensifies the perspective of understanding peace through military means, particularly in terms of territorial integrity. Our results show that both primes have a symmetrical effect in shifting views to military peace. Yet, on reducing the view of personal peace, and similar to Corstange and York (2018), we show that the framing can have differential effects on the outcome. The impact of the out-group prime is more severe.

These results are taken from a specific moment and recent surveys have shown that citizens are more pessimistic about the outcomes of the war (for example, in October 2024, 32 percent considered Ukraine could give up some of its territories for peace (Kyiv International Institute for Sociology 2024)). It would be interesting to repeat the experiment and analyze whether views on the feasibility of victory affect the impact of the in-group/out-group prime. Recent research on polarization has shown that the belief held has a greater impact than in-group/out-group alignment (Balcells et al. 2023).

Future research could explore in more detail how to create a more auspicious negotiating environment. There is a history of broken agreements and our results show that Russia is perceived as a threat and not as a reliable negotiating partner. Further studies could explore how to create more trust in negotiations. For example, our results showed a strong impact of negotiations on the desire for accountability. Other research could explore the meaning of peace and the impact of negotiations in other conflict environments to examine generalizability beyond a "hot" war. The research questions could be examined in low-level or frozen conflicts, such as Georgia, Azerbaijan-Armenia, and Cyprus.

Our research also has policy implications. Based on the experience from 2014 to 2022, Ukraine is concerned that any new peace negotiations with Russia might not lead to a lasting and genuine resolution of the conflict. Instead, there is apprehension that such negotiations could be exploited by Russia to create more favorable conditions for future military campaigns, leading to new escalations rather than a sustainable peace. This historical context fundamentally shapes Ukraine's approach to negotiations, and negotiators must

emphasize the need for robust security guarantees and tangible actions over verbal commitments. Secondly, we demonstrate that the public considers longer-term changes on social issues to be important, but that these aspirations get lost when faced with the prospect of negotiations as the public prioritizes security and concrete gains. As other authors in this Special Issue discuss, it is important to win the war without losing the peace. Third-party negotiators can endeavor to keep these social issues on the table. We show that these topics are important for the Ukrainian people and furthermore they can be part of a wider vision of post-war Ukraine and relevant for EU accession or internal accountability and reform. Thus, we see a connection between the content of peace, post-war conditions, and desires for a better life.

In summary, the prospects for peace negotiations are heavily influenced by the Ukrainian public's inelastic stance on territorial integrity and sovereignty, coupled with a deep mistrust of Russia's commitment to any agreements. These factors, combined with the prevailing threat perceptions, suggest that any future negotiations will need to address these core concerns to be perceived as credible and to garner public support in Ukraine. The study's insights underscore the importance of understanding public opinion in conflict zones, as it plays a crucial role in shaping the stability and success of any potential peace settlement.

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