

Risks of Overstressing Corruption: The Case of Ukraine

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Abstract

This paper has as its reference point the issue of corruption in Ukraine, which has recently once again become the subject of attention due to reports that it may be an important factor when it comes to the recalcitrance of some of Ukraine's Western partners and allies with regard to offering military support for the country's war effort against Russia. The main objective is to demonstrate how the West's tendency to overstress this problem, for which the paper offers proof, that could manifest itself in it applying undue pressure on the Ukrainian authorities, entails risks and may have a number of undesirable repercussions due to 1) providing fuel to Russian disinformation campaigns and negatively affecting the perceptions of Ukraine among Western citizens, 2) hampering the Ukrainian military campaign and its appraisal abroad, 3) indirectly contributing to changing the nature of Ukrainian nationalism by making it more exclusionary.

Keywords: Ukraine, USA, Russia, corruption, civic and ethnic nationalism

JEL: F5, D73, F51

Introduction

Since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which has provided a serious test for the durability of the international legal order, the Ukrainian side has shown a valiant effort in managing to defy the initial predictions of many military experts by largely staving off the short-term threat to its country's continued existence as an independent state, proving to be able to more than hold its own against the Russian forces. Even though the attention of the vast majority of Ukrainian citizens has naturally focused on the war effort and everything surrounding the battlefield dynamics, discussions

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regarding the fight against the internal enemy (corruption) alongside the one against the external adversary (Russia) have continued to make the headlines.

Notwithstanding the enduring salience of the topic of corruption in Ukraine, the article contends that there are ample grounds to assume that the extent of its occurrence is overstated and Ukraine is hardly an outlier country in Eastern Europe in this regard. Furthermore, there are inherent risks for both the West and Ukraine with regard to overly publicizing the issue of corruption, especially when it comes to elevating its importance to that of a litmus test in terms of assessing whether to fully support the country's war effort. A threefold argument is advanced. Firstly, being too candid in the criticism about the state of corruption in Ukraine may in addition provide extra ammunition to the Western-based detractors of the Ukrainian cause, thus reducing the levels of public support for the continued provision of assistance to the country, also turn out to have unintended negative effects with regard to internal legitimacy issues within Western democracies themselves. Secondly, the tendency to exaggerate the levels of corruption within Ukraine has contributed to somewhat misguided policies in terms of the type of military support envisioned for Ukraine during the prelude to and in the initial stages of war, and an emphasis on the need to take quick action to counter corruption might derail the Ukrainian military campaign by creating unnecessary tensions within the upper echelons of Ukrainian society. Thirdly, if Ukraine is ultimately unable to prevail or attain most of its aims in its defensive war against Russia (largely due to insufficient Western support, in part attributable to the focus on the corruption issues in Ukraine), there are reasons to assume that such a scenario may bring about a change in the dominant brand of Ukrainian nationalism by engendering a shift towards a more ethnic-based and exclusionary version of it.

The argument rests on two underlying assumptions – that continued military assistance from the West is absolutely crucial in terms of allowing Ukraine to at least maintain parity in the fight (Dettmer, 2024; Sanger, 2024) and that any scenario that does not involve some form of Ukrainian victory in the war will represent a highly detrimental development from the standpoint of the collective interests of the West (Kureth, 2024). In the short term, a Russian “win” in Ukraine is likely to significantly worsen the security environment in Europe, particularly from the standpoint of the Central and Eastern European countries, as well as the Baltic states, and reduce trust in the West (especially in the United States) among its allies (Ibid.). It will embolden the imperial ambitions of other autocracies such as China and potentially spur further nuclear proliferation (Einhorn, 2023; Kureth, 2024). In the long term, it may even sound the death knell for the Western style international system that is based on the rule of law, the importance of state sovereignty as well as a strong opposition to the notion that military force can be used as an instrument to redraw the borders of states (Novo, 2024), essentially ushering in a return to the era of state competition in a modernist realm where virtually unbridled Realpolitik used to reign supreme (Browning, 2018; Porter 2018).

The paper adopts a qualitative approach that is reliant on the unobtrusive research method – the integrated analysis of mostly secondary sources (in-depth reports, academic

articles, newspaper publications, and so on) from multiple disciplines in order to support the main arguments and provide tacit predictions regarding the future course of events in Ukraine (Kutsyuruba, 2017). The information from the different documents is examined, interpreted and synthesized in order to elicit meaning and develop new perspectives. The article emulates Strike and Posner's definitions of synthesis as an activity in which separate parts are brought together to form a whole, with the result greater than the sum of its parts, bringing about an innovative element (Sim and Mengshoel, 2023). The approach to the analysis is inductive in the sense that the general propositions gradually emerge from the actual (empirical) data.

The article intends to make a contribution to the wider sociology and political science literature by casting light on the somewhat understudied topic of anti-corruption endeavours and the risks that they entail for countries that have found themselves at war or remain vulnerable due to the potential for hostile neighbouring states to undertake offensive operations that could threaten their sovereignty. It also offers some new insights into the state of flux typifying contemporary Ukrainian nationalism and how a perception of Western abandonment of Ukraine may tilt the delicate balance between civic and ethnic nationalism in the direction of the latter. There may be opportunities for follow-up research involving semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian government officials and ordinary citizens once the war has been brought to an end.

Literature review

Corruption is a broad concept that can render itself to somewhat imprecise definitions, being difficult to measure directly due to constituting a subset of activities that are illegal according to most countries' legal systems (Ragauskas and Valeškaitė, 2020). In its classical definition it involves the misuse of public or entrusted power for the sake of private gains or benefits. Accordingly, as a rule it entails the involvement of public officials in bribery as well as patronage and nepotism (Ibid.) Corruption represents a serious social problem that transcends national boundaries and has been the subject of extensive research, mainly due to its pervasiveness across divergent national contexts. In developing countries it has been strongly linked to political and economic failure, greater inequality between citizens as well as the slowing down of market development, with the government measures targeting corruption tending to lack effectiveness. However, corruption is also very much capable of affecting entities that fit the category of developed states and established democracies, including the major countries in Western Europe (Wittberg, 2023).

The fight against corruption generally involves three layers – developing an accurate and multifaceted understanding of the problem, setting up anti-corruption institutions, and coming up with effective strategies that could reduce the prevalence of the practice. Corruption is often regarded as exhibiting features of a “principal-agent” problem. (Marquette and Peiffer, 2015; Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2020) Under such a framework, one actor (the “agent”) is better informed and possesses greater decision-making power in a specific

situation and uses this advantage to advance one's own aims, potentially against the interests of the other actor (the "principal") (Svensson et al., 2022). For instance, due to the asymmetry of information in their favour, the "agents" (public officials) may under certain circumstances be able to use their access to public resources to enrich themselves and/or their allies while the public (the "principals") are not in a position to properly monitor the situation and hold the public officials accountable. Even though the principal-agent approach with regard to understanding corruption remains influential (Marquette and Peiffer, 2015), there is a growing body of literature that now considers corruption to be more aptly understood through the lens of a collective action theory rather than the principal-agent one. In essence, in a society where corrupt behaviour could be considered to be the norm and free riding when it comes to contributing towards the public good is par for the course, both the group of actors referred to as "agents" and those falling within the category of "principals" may be expected to act in a corrupt fashion (Ibid.). Thus, there is a shift from focusing on macro-level structures and formal rules towards the analysis of micro-level phenomena connected to the informal rules and norms that reinforce patterns of systemic corruption (Svensson et al., 2022).

Corruption has been recognized as a problem in Ukraine since the country restored its independence in 1991, which paved the way for the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 2020 the Corruption Perception Index ranked Ukraine in 117th place out of 180 countries that were part of the dataset with a score of 33/100 (Idris, 2022). The corruption in Ukrainian government institutions has also manifested itself in knock-on effects with regard to the wider society, with a significant proportion of the population employed in the shadow economy, and elements of organized crime often finding themselves in a position to draw benefits from corruption schemes with virtual impunity (Ibid.). During the tenure of pro-Western President Petro Poroshenko who came into power after the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in 2014, a number of anticorruption bodies, including the National Agency for Prevention of Corruption (NAPC), the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU), the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) and the Asset Management and Recovery Office (AMRO), were established (Idris, 2022). Some reform successes ensued: the cessation of direct gas sales from Russia, (Filippenko, 2019) which contributed to reducing the space in which corrupt practices could occur; improvements in public sector transparency, which was courtesy of an electronic system for state procurement tenders being introduced; and an online declaration system obliging senior officials to declare their assets. Nonetheless, the new anti-corruption bodies faced strong political pressures from the elites and the oligarchs who were opposed to any far-reaching reforms. Thus, one notable weakness of the anti-corruption efforts in Ukraine, in common with other countries in Eastern Europe, has been the lack of effective implementation of the legislation providing for criminal penalties in proven cases of corruption (Idris, 2022).

Corruption in Ukraine and the possible conditionality of Western support

While the topic of corruption was deemphasized in the initial months following Russia's invasion (Toosi, 2023), with the aides of American president Joe Biden only laconically mentioning corruption-related issues, a confidential strategy document obtained by POLITICO that was published in October 2023 suggests that unless sufficient measures are taken by Ukrainian officials to tackle corruption in the upper echelons of power, US support for the war could be substantially reduced and there may even be a scenario involving the Western allies abandoning Ukraine in what could be considered to be a largely existential battle (Ibid.). As succinctly acknowledged by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in September 2022 at the UN Security Council: "One thing is clear: if Russia stops fighting and withdraws, the war ends. If Ukraine stops fighting, Ukraine ends" (Lederer, 2023).

In September 2023, the United States had actually issued a number of notices to the Ukrainian authorities, indicating that certain types of economic aid may be provided only if Ukraine demonstrates sufficient progress in reforming its institutions (Bertrand and Marquardt, 2023).

There are also some signs, as mentioned in an influential report from the German Marshall Fund in the summer of 2023, that Western powers will offer significant contributions to Ukraine's post-war recovery, estimated to cost billions of dollars, only if they settle upon a unified strategy, which will make aid conditional on the country demonstrating clear progress in tackling judicial corruption and paving the way for the recovery funds to be digitally traced (Wintour, 2023).

Even though, due in part to its far-reaching effects, corruption is the type of issue that is ill-advised to be swept under the carpet, the problem is that in the case of Ukraine its extent may actually be exaggerated by Western policymakers and the general public (Kuzio, 2022; New Voice of Ukraine, 2023).

While the conflict is ongoing and its endpoint is shrouded in uncertainty, there are a multitude of risks in starting to suddenly overemphasize the salience of the issue, especially if pronouncements along this nature are made by the Western backers of Ukraine.

Admittedly, Western countries have generally not gone public in terms of voicing their dissatisfaction with the levels of corruption of Ukraine, but Western officials overstating the issue, even if it is done as part of "behind the curtain" conversations with Ukrainian politicians, may in addition to inviting accusations of double standards, turn out to have negative repercussions for both Ukraine and the Western countries themselves.

Putting the corruption issue in Ukraine into perspective and the risks of paying lip service to Russian information warfare

Firstly, in terms of considerations pertaining to fairness, it needs to be pointed out, as stated by Allan Pagh Kristensen, the head of the EU Anti-Corruption Initiative, that some seemingly gold standard measures of corruption such as the Corruption

Perception Index may provide an inaccurate or skewed picture with regard to the actual level of corruption. One of the reasons behind it is that the nature of the reporting may unduly publish the countries with a higher degree of media freedom due to corruption being allowed to become a prominent part of the information space (Hrudka, 2024). On the contrary, in countries such as Russia where the media is tightly controlled by the authorities, publicizing instances of corruption may subsequently result in draconian punishments for the journalists responsible (Agence France-Presse, 2024).

While Katarína Mathernová, the Ambassador of the European Union to Ukraine, has acknowledged that the country has a problem with corruption, she has also praised the authorities for showing a strong dedication to fighting it (Krčmárik, 2023). According to data provided by *Transparency International*, in the aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution that occurred in 2014, Ukraine has been demonstrating visible progress in its fight against corruption (Dickinson, 2024). The Eastern European state climbed twelve places in the 2023 edition of TI's annual survey, which accorded it the rank of 104th among the 180 featured countries, with an increase in its anti-corruption score from 33 to 36 (out of a maximum of 100 points). The three-point improvement is considered to be one of the most impressive results over the course of 2023, especially in the context of the realities of the war affecting virtually all corners of Ukraine (Ibid.).

The issue of corruption in Ukraine is also sometimes highlighted as a way to justify the rejection of the idea that the country could be set on a path toward a fast-tracking of its membership in NATO, with Biden publicly stating in July 2023 that the country is not ready for acceding to NATO (Rogers, 2023). However, it is somewhat disingenuous to unduly emphasize the relevancy of this issue, given that according to some metrics, such as those identified in a *Transparency International* January 2024 report (Herbert Smith Freehills, 2024), Ukraine is actually ahead of Turkey, a NATO member in good standing, with the latter actually having slid down significantly in the corruption ranks since the beginning of Recep Erdoğan's tenure as president, recording its lowest score on the Corruption Perception Index since 1995 (Medya News, 2024). Furthermore, the 2020 Governance Defence Integrity Index indicated that 14 of the then 22 NATO member states had refrained from addressing corruption in their military doctrines (Naval, 2023), which demonstrates that for close to two thirds of NATO countries corruption is not necessarily viewed as a strategic or crucial issue. In a practical sense, NATO membership in itself is largely epiphenomenal when it comes to corruption trends within countries as well as the somewhat related issue of democratic backsliding, as exemplified by the cases of Turkey and Hungary, which over the course of the last five years have become both more corrupt and more authoritarian, with the latter, which used to be a fully functioning democracy for most of the 2000s and 2010s, notably starting to be considered an „electoral autocracy” or „illiberal democracy” in a number of recent scholarly assessments (Cook, 2022; Camut, 2023).

Thus, going so far as to make corruption a deal-breaker issue in terms of providing further support to Ukraine will likely be perceived by the Ukrainians as a display of

double standards on the part of the West and potentially further erode Ukrainian morale given the difficult situation on the battlefield.

Furthermore, too frequently broaching the topic of corruption may only give extra ammunition to Russia's information-psychological warfare against Ukraine and the West, which is fully aligned with the Putin regime's military strategy (Garner, 2024).

For countries like Ukraine, the Russian information war can plausibly be recognized as an actual existential threat. This has been reflected in the policies pursued by Ukrainian governments in the years following Russia's annexation of Crimea and parts of the Donbas in 2014, which have aimed to reduce the use of Russian media among their citizens (Szostek and Orlova, 2024).

Since the major escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Russian President Vladimir Putin, has often made references to the allegedly excessive corruption in Ukraine, even declaring in November 2023 that "corruption in Ukraine is unmatched anywhere in the world" (TASS, 2023). Such claims on the part of Russian officials may not only reflect their enmity towards what they consider to be an "artificial" Ukrainian state, but may also be traceable to purely instrumental considerations tied to their "war over Western opinion", as they are well aware that the general public in the West may be inclined to react in certain ways to such pronouncements. By tying the provision of military aid to Ukraine to the latter meeting certain benchmarks, which may not be completely realistic in a wartime environment, the West may unwittingly be paying lip service to the argument that Ukraine is too corrupt to support, which is frequently advanced by voices on the far right of the political spectrum in Europe and the United States, and has also started to enter the mainstream of European and US politics (Wolff and Malyarenko, 2024). There are ample reasons to assume that people who believe governance and corruption are salient issues in the respective recipient states may be more likely to exhibit aid fatigue (Bauhr et al., 2013). Thus a renewed focus on corruption in Ukraine by the Biden administration may cause even political moderates and traditional conservatives, who have been largely supportive of Ukraine, to start changing their tune, becoming more inclined to give the nod to the efforts to block funding packages for Kyiv in the US Senate.

The potential risks for Western societies

In addition to stoking additional concerns in Ukraine by creating unnecessary doubts in the minds of Ukrainian policy-makers as to the likelihood of continued Western support in the future, the over-eagerness on the part of Western politicians to publicize their dissatisfaction with corruption in Ukraine and the Ukrainian authorities' seeming lack of progress in tackling it may actually turn out to have a blowback effect in terms of the political dynamics within the United States.

Even though the US administration's messages pertaining to corruption in Ukraine are of course intended mainly for Ukrainian consumption, specifically that of Ukrainian politicians, given the ease with which even classified information may leak out in today's world, it is not out of the question that the proliferation of "official stories" touching upon

Ukrainian corruption may foment further political radicalization among the conservative movement in the United States. Far right actors with an in-built suspicion towards what they consider to be information pieces emanating from official media outlets may nonetheless be inclined to accept the validity of data from the mainstream media if it aligns with their preconceived notions and appears to confirm some of their biases. A January 2021 global report by *Transparency International* suggested that corruption in the United States had reached its highest levels since 2012 (Griffin and Mackinnon, 2021). While there is a distinction between corruption in general and electoral fraud in particular, the two issues may intersect in the public mind, with the former creating a sense of disillusionment with the actual electoral process and affecting voter turn-out (Fortin-Rittberger et al., 2017; Tambe and Monyake, 2023).

According to some surveys, there is a surprisingly wide acceptance (approximately 33% to just over 40% of Americans may subscribe to such views, depending on the poll) among American adults of conspiratorial claims pertaining to the possibility that the 2020 US presidential election saw widespread electoral fraud that purportedly affected the outcome in favour of Joe Biden (Yang, 2022; Viala-Gaudefroy, 2024). The United States Capitol Attack on January 6, 2021, which involved quite a few individuals influenced by QAnon conspiracy theories, which often tend to overlap with Putin apologetics (Audureau, 2023), sent shock waves throughout the United States, as it represented an unprecedented effort to overturn a US presidential election through violent means and constituted an inflection point for political extremism in America.

At the same time, according to some academic assessments, the structural conditions generating this insurrection are unlikely to ameliorate, so the potential for political violence will remain (Kydd, 2021; Smith, 2024). With the Biden administration and pro-Ukrainian politicians devoting a lot of attention to the issue of corruption in Ukraine while at the same time continuing to emphasize the need for providing significant financial support for the Ukrainian war effort, further ideological fuel may inadvertently be provided to members of far-right movements, which may attempt some sort of a repeat of the January 2021 events if the next US presidential election (to be held in November 2024) results in a Joe Biden victory (Nordlinger, 2022).

One recent example of a blowback scenario, which further testifies as to how difficult it is to fully harness the power of words by making sure they only reach a foreign audience while the domestic one remains insulated from them, concerns the case of Russia and the rhetoric promoted by Russian-based platforms pertaining to the COVID-19 vaccines. According to a European Union October 2021 report, a systematic disinformation campaign launched by Russia with the purpose of fostering doubts and creating misgivings about COVID-19 vaccines in the West had the unintended effect of contributing to the high degree of vaccine scepticism within Russia itself, negatively affecting the Putin administration's plan to see a high number of Russians receive vaccines (in June 2021, during his annual televised call-in show, the Russian president

spent around 30 minutes encouraging his compatriots to get themselves vaccinated) (Troianovski, 2021).

Finger-pointing on corruption and attitudes within Ukraine

Another risk associated with being overly harsh when it comes to the rhetoric employed towards corruption in the case of Ukraine has to do with the effect it could have on Ukraine and its citizens.

One of the assumptions that underpins Macey's razor is that all governments try to convince people that they do their best to act virtuously and charitably within the political wiggle room that they have (Macey, 2002). However, given that there is an inevitable asymmetry between the information the governments are privy to and the one that the population as a whole possesses, it is an inordinately difficult task for the citizens to accurately evaluate the honesty of the government and the efficacy with which it performs its duties. As a result, public perception of the government will in most instances be either overly cynical or insufficiently cynical (Ibid.).

The signs are clear that most Ukrainian citizens are not too trusting of the authorities and are fully aware of the extent of corruption in their country. Prior to the start of the war, Ukrainians had a healthy suspicion towards the motives of government representatives and Volodymyr Zelenskyy's approval rating was relatively low, in part because of unfulfilled promises related to the cleansing of the state's political apparatus (Cook, 2023). According to the results of a Kyiv International Institute of Sociology poll published in September 2023, Ukrainians actually rated corruption as the country's second-most-serious problem (Stockman, 2023). However, if the fight against corruption starts to be associated in Ukrainian public discourses with what are viewed as unreasonable Western demands or even blackmail, implying the possibility of withdrawing or markedly reducing support for the war effort, it is not out of the question that the pendulum may swing in the other direction and Ukrainian citizens may start to view anti-corruption initiatives and campaigns to "clean up politics" with a higher degree of cynicism. This will of course be counter-productive in terms of the long-term willingness to take corruption seriously, with a few studies corroborating that among ordinary citizens (political) cynicism is actually more likely to yield positive or at least non-committal attitudes towards corruption (Thomson, 2022). This is valid especially when the (alleged) culprits are political candidates citizens are favourably disposed towards (Scofield, 2020), and even increases the likelihood of the individuals themselves engaging in corrupt activities (Tavits, 2010; Thomson, 2022).

Furthermore, the warnings issued to Ukraine in relation to corruption may be occurring at a time when there is a sense among many Ukrainians that the West is not doing enough for the defence of their country. Since the autumn of 2023 insiders close to Zelenskyy have revealed that the Ukrainian president is increasingly feeling betrayed by his Western allies due to the Biden administration's carefully calibrated assistance to Ukraine clipping his wings by allowing him to survive the war, but also precluding him from actually winning it (Nixey, 2023). In part because of the lack of success of the 2023 Ukrainian counter-offensive, the

Ukrainian president has also been candid about his exhaustion and exasperation because of finding it difficult to convince his allies to keep the faith with the country (Shuster, 2023; Lister, 2023).

On the popular level, according to a poll conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) from February 2024 the proportion of Ukrainians who believe the West is tired of supporting Ukraine has risen from 30 to 44% over the course of the last four months. To put things in perspective, at the end of 2022 only 15% of Ukrainian citizens subscribed to such a sentiment (Court, 2024).

Given how strong the rally-round-the-flag effect is in situations when a country finds itself fighting a war against subjugation by a foreign power, the apparent lack of Western trust in the still popular Zelenskyy due to the perception that he is being micromanaged or is having his hand forced when it comes to dealing with corruption may arguably solidify the perception among Ukrainians that their country is being treated as a nation-state without proper agency.

The dangers pertaining to the conduct of the Ukrainian military campaign against Russia

If the rather recent history is anything to go by, underestimating the resolve and maturity of the Ukrainian citizens and their government can only lead the West down the wrong path in terms of finding a way to bring the conflict to a satisfying conclusion.

During the prelude to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, US experts are believed to have shaped the actions of policymakers by concluding that the Ukrainian army would fare no better against the Russians than the Afghan Armed Forces did against the Taliban following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was completed on 30 August 2021. Due to the conviction that Ukraine would crumble quickly in the face of a sustained Russian onslaught, expert advice initially influenced NATO and Western governments to only consider sending military equipment suitable for partisan warfare against an occupying force, which in hindsight turned out to be the wrong approach (Kuzio, 2022). As Eliot Cohen, a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, has pointed out (quoted in Vorozhko, 2023), “the inflated estimates of Russian military capacity and the downplaying of that of Ukraine” had real consequences in terms of slowing down the supply of weaponry to Ukraine and affected the accuracy of the policymakers’ assessment of the realities (Ibid.). Overly pessimistic assessments pertaining to the degree in which corruption permeates aspects of society in Ukraine may have also played their part in influencing such important calculations. For instance, Orysia Lutsevych, head of Chatham House’s Ukraine Forum, opined that during the build-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the West mistakenly assumed that Ukraine was simply a weaker and more corrupt version of Russia, which resulted in the impression that a military struggle against the invading force was essentially doomed from the outset (Ibid.).

The pressure applied by the Western countries on Zelenskyy with regard to the need to be fully on board when it comes to the fight against corruption may also indirectly

affect the war effort in a negative fashion. For example, the long-reported rift between Zelenskyy and Valery Zaluzhnyi, which culminated in the latter's dismissal as a Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in February 2024, could in part be traced to the government sacking a number of military recruiters in August 2023, which had happened in the context of corruption crackdowns (Euractiv, 2023). Zaluzhnyi had been critical of the decision to release these officials from their duties due to the level of professionalism displayed by them (Blayne Chronicle, 2023; Reuters, 2023). In turn, a number of analysts have characterized the decision to replace Zaluzhnyi as a "colossal political gamble" or even a mistake, and the reshuffle of top officials that resulted in the four-star general's demotion has not been particularly popular with the Ukrainian public (Lieven, 2024).

Zaluzhny who notably described Russia as "a feudal state where the cheapest resource is human life" while emphasizing that the most important thing in Ukraine is its human capital had enjoyed a lot of respect from his troops and was even considered a father figure by many of them (Reuters, 2023; Ciaramella, 2024). In early 2023 Zaluzhny had reportedly broken ranks with Zelenskyy over the utility of sacrificing too many soldiers for the defence of Bakhmut, recommending a retreat from the city (Tsurkan, 2023).

On the other hand, while possessing a high degree of expertise in his field, distinguishing himself during the defense of Kyiv and the Kharkiv counteroffensive, his replacement Oleksandr Syrskyi, has developed somewhat of a reputation of having a higher level of tolerance for wartime casualties (Ciaramella, 2024). In addition to there being no guarantee of success, the possible perception that under a new leadership, the Ukrainian army may show a willingness to approximate some aspects of the Russian meat-grinder strategy could have the negative effect of providing further ammunition to Ukrainian detractors by tapping into the narrative promoted by them that there is a moral equivalence when it comes to the way in which the war campaigns are conducted by Russia and Ukraine, especially given the tendency on their part to echo Putin's rhetoric that the West is using Ukrainians as "cannon fodder" (Bureiko, 2021; French, 2022; Reuters, 2022).

Also worth considering is that in a general sense anti-corruption measures have their inherent risks, as they may be politicized in various ways, resulting in unintended negative consequences, such as the undue targeting of political opponents and the consolidation of power in the hands of a ruling party. Overly aggressive anti-corruption endeavours undertaken by Ukraine may necessitate the removal of prominent politicians from their positions, which may put Zelenskyy in a no-win situation due to his country being likely to attract further accusations of democratic backsliding. This will serve to embolden those actors in the West, such as former US Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy, who have lambasted the Ukrainian president for exhibiting dictatorial tendencies (Edelman, 2023). Notably, in the summer of 2023, the Ukrainian president's proposal to make wartime corruption synonymous with treason drew serious backlash from human rights watchdogs and domestic opponents (Melkozerova, 2023).

A potential transformation in the nature of Ukrainian nationalism

One additional risk connected to the Western pressure on Ukraine to tackle corruption, as mentioned previously, concerns the likely impact on Ukrainian public opinion. A decline in the Ukrainian fortunes on the battlefield, especially if the reason for that is attributed to the wobbling support or political passivity of the West, may usher in another transformation in the frequently evolving nature of Ukrainian nationalism.

Even though Putin's war has essentially contributed to eliminating any potential scenario in which most Ukrainians would ever envision themselves as gravitating towards the Russian sphere of influence in the conceivable future, it is by no means guaranteed that Ukrainians are immune to displaying disillusionment with the West or even adopting anti-Western sentiments.

In the build-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, more than 60% of Ukrainians expressed doubts that a Russian attack on their country could really happen „in the nearest future” (Mirovalev, 2022). While these attitudes may have to a degree been a reflection of wishful thinking and an unwillingness to entertain the possibility of their larger neighbour blatantly violating a multitude of international conventions, there are also serious grounds to view them through a prism of distrust of the West. For instance, Ihor Tyshevych, a Belarusian political analyst at the Ukrainian Institute for the Future, noted in February 2022 how Ukrainians are critical of what they regard as predictions from the West, especially if their tone is perceived to be alarmist (Ibid.).

There is some evidence that the shared experience of the Euromaidan and the conflict with Russia, which in actuality began in 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, has contributed to providing substantive content to the previously somewhat empty slogan of civic nationalism, allowing Ukraine to emerge as a consolidated civic and political nation (Minich, 2018).

As argued by John Hutchinson, a British interdisciplinary scholar with a focus on nationalism, “the constitutive myths of many nations are derived from war experience”, with wars spreading and solidifying old myths while also in a position to create new ones (Wilson, 2024). Ukraine is currently able to point out to a powerful foundational myth, which has been officialised by the parliamentary resolution in 2021, which defined the Maidan revolution as “one of the key moments of Ukrainian state formation” as well as a manifestation of the national idea of freedom. In a sense, contemporary Ukrainian civic identity could be regarded as premised on the notion that a prerequisite to Ukrainian patriotism is the stark opposition to the Russian view that Ukraine is a country that is to forever remain tethered to the Russian cultural and geopolitical project (Ibid.).

Between 2020 and July 2022 there was a more than 20 percentage points increase in Ukrainian people's pride in their citizenship, with this development accompanied by a rise in support for the idea that democracy is the best form of government, which increasingly began to be regarded as fulfilling the expectations of ordinary Ukrainians. In essence, for the majority of Ukrainians the loyalty to Ukraine as an independent state and political project appears to be trumping any considerations pertaining to ethnic identity, with interest in the

Ukrainian language among ethnically Russian Ukrainian citizens in the southern and eastern parts of the country notably increasing over the course of the last two years (Higgins and Mazhulin, 2023).

Political realist John Mearsheimer has stressed that in the contemporary world most countries have been able to choose from a trichotomy of ideological options - liberal democracy (akin to Westernization), nationalism, and Communism - when it came to charting their political orientation over the years. However, Ukraine has been characterized as somewhat unique by providing an ideological space for two tendencies that may seemingly be at loggerheads with each other – a parallel increase in Ukrainian nationalism and liberal-democratic Westernization (Boman, 2023). It is arguably the case that the sympathy for Western ideas of governance has contributed to “taming” Ukrainian nationalism and managed to elevate the relatively more inclusive civic over the relatively more ethnic dimension of it.

However, given Ukraine’s status as a “laboratory of nationalisms” (Wilson, 2024), such equilibria remain delicate and fragile. While, as stated in the previous paragraphs, the Euromaidan has been associated with unleashing a powerful wave of civic nationalism, the manner in which this feeling of belonging is expressed has nonetheless been evaluated as potentially being able to expediently switch to legitimating old forms of ethno-cultural exclusion if the right conditions arise (Ibid.).

Past historical episodes suggest that ethnic nations and ethnic nationalisms may (re) emerge out of civic ones in cases when the state functions become weakened or the state collapses, with a dominant ethnicity wresting control over the state apparatus (Velev, 2005). If the outcome of the war is widely perceived as a loss for Ukraine, then it could conceivably be equated to a state collapse in terms of its manifestations. A widespread belief among the Ukrainians that relatively trivial considerations (pertaining to corruption) have contributed to the West hampering them in their existential fight against Russia, i.e. they are largely left to their own devices in terms of weapons deliveries and the eventual settlement that ends the war turns out to be far from satisfactory for Ukraine due to the need to agree to large territorial concessions, may arguably unleash anti-Western in addition to the significantly more potent anti-Russian sentiments, essentially contributing to the transformation of Ukrainian nationalism in a more markedly ethnic direction.

In light of recent events, the possibility of such a scenario occurring remains a concern due to some setbacks for Ukraine on the battlefield in early 2024 such as the Russian capture of the city of Avdiivka, the underlying issues with weapons deliveries from the West, and the shocking death of prominent Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, possibly the most influential opponent of the war within Russia (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2024).

During Ukraine’s post-Soviet history, parties and organizations with a core of far right members have remained on the political periphery and to a large extent faced exclusion from national politics, but their legitimacy has increased in the context of the ongoing war, to an extent due to the heroism displayed by many members of the Azov battalion

(subsequently enveloped in the wider Ukrainian armed forces), considered to have some of the strongest fighters in its ranks, in the defence of the country (Pacheco, 2022).

A new surge of ethnic nationalism with blood-and-soil elements within Ukraine is also not an unlikely development if we are to take into account that even a number of mature Western democracies have in recent years seen a marked rise in such exclusionary attitudes pertaining to their national communities (Nordlinger, 2022).

If we are to return to the topic of corruption, corruption has sometimes been characterized as somewhat more likely to thrive in an ethnically nationalist state (Cerquetti, et al., 2012; Kagwanja, 2024). Thus if Ukraine is steered away from civic towards a more ethnic conception of the nation (especially if the country is forced to give up to Russia additional territories that are mostly inhabited by ethnic Russians, in the process forging a more homogeneous national community within the country), this may in the long run actually provide the ingredients for a further deterioration of the situation with regard to corruption-related issues.

Conclusion

The article attempted to elucidate how forcing the hand of Ukraine to expediently get its house in order with regard to tackling corruption, albeit generally reflective of good intentions on the part of the West, could have a number of deleterious impacts. While combating corruption and promoting good governance are (if considered in a vacuum) always commendable endeavours, there are inherent risks for both Ukraine and the West in terms of the successful resolution of the ongoing war if the issue is given too much credence and prioritization. It could constrain certain policy options for the Ukrainian leadership, negatively affect the Western public's willingness to continue to support the war effort and even potentially contribute to brewing a new more exclusionary type of Ukrainian nationalism with a tinge of anti-Western sentiment, especially given that 2024 is likely to be a decisive year when it comes to the military realities on the ground (Schmidt, 2024). With the situation in Ukraine clearly presenting a "moral crisis" rather than just a military one (Budjeryn, 2023; Rubenstein, 2023), the fading of the Ukrainian conflict from the public consciousness in countries such as the United States, in part due to other international crises deflecting attention away from Ukraine (Baunov, 2024), and the likelihood (if the current trends continue) of Russia gaining significant ground or even forcing the collapse of Ukraine's army (Manley, 2024), which would constitute a major strategic blow for the West (Michta, 2024), losing sight of the forest for the trees by being side-tracked from the overarching objective of securing a victory for the Ukrainian side may be rather ill-advised.

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