

WAR IN UKRAINE

## SOCIOCULTURAL RUNNING ESTIMATE

### Internal Challenges for Post-War Ukraine



#### In This Running Estimate...

- Domestic support for Putin remains high, and support for Russia's so-called "special military operation (SMO)" remains strong. However, confidence in the SMO's success has declined slightly, and many Russians support negotiations to end the war.
- As Ukraine anticipates a long-term recovery phase, three emerging dynamics threaten to undermine national resilience: the widespread proliferation of weapons across the country since the 2022 outbreak of hostilities, societal trauma exacerbated by disrupted families and unaddressed psychological harm, and a significant brain drain of skilled young professionals seeking opportunities abroad.
- These trends could reduce Ukraine's ability to rebuild state capacity, reintegrate veterans and war refugees into society, rebuild communities, and sustain democratic momentum, presenting new vulnerabilities exploitable by adversaries (namely Russia).
- Drawing lessons from other post-conflict zones, such as Colombia and the Balkans, can help inform Ukraine's long-term recovery, directly connecting research findings to the mitigation of its emerging vulnerabilities.



Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ukrainian\\_soldiers\\_in\\_mariupol.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ukrainian_soldiers_in_mariupol.jpg)

# DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

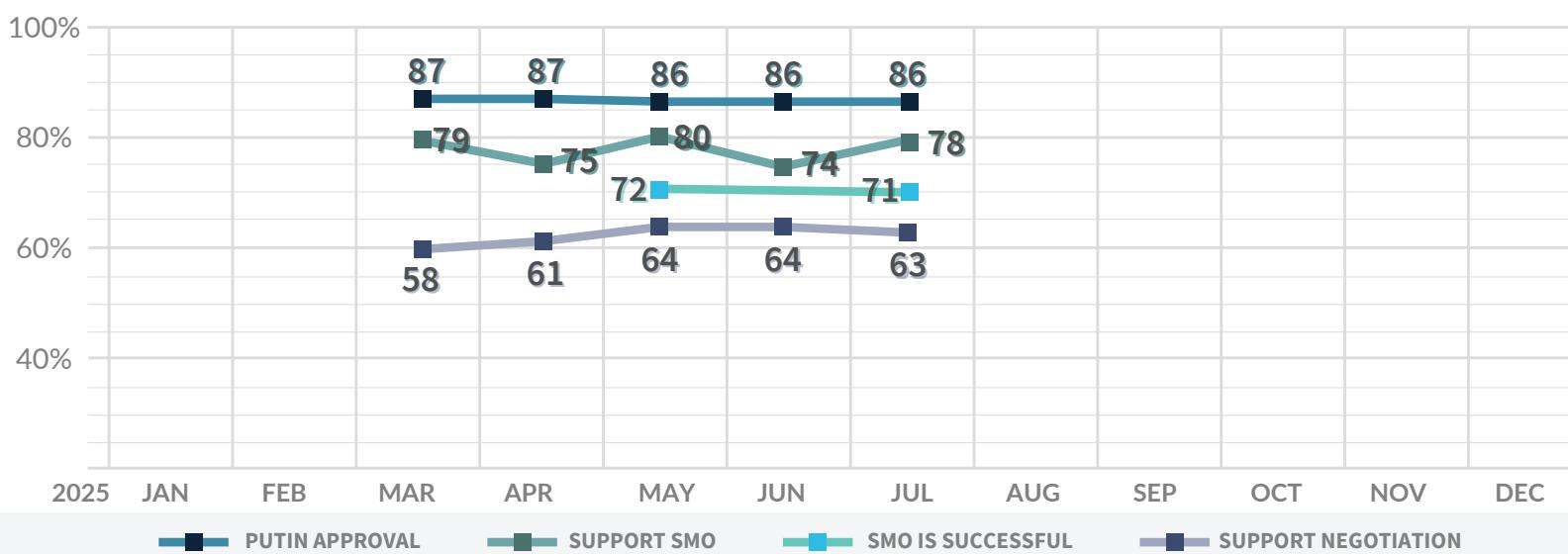


Figure 1: Domestic Russian Perceptions, GCKN.<sup>1</sup>

NOTE: Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

## PUTIN'S POPULARITY

Russian President Vladimir Putin maintains remarkably high approval ratings (July = 86 percent) despite the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and associated economic pressures.<sup>2</sup> This support is not monolithic but deeply rooted in a combination of perceived strengths, a lack of viable alternatives, and effective information control. His enduring popularity significantly constrains options for internal dissent, negotiation, and potential off-ramps to the conflict.

### Drivers of Putin's Popularity

- **Perceived Strength and Leadership:** Russians perceive Putin as a strong leader. His determination, experience, and patriotism resonate with a significant portion of the Russian populace. This perception is especially important in the context of the geopolitical tension surrounding Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a Kremlin-driven domestic view of Western interference aiming to curb Russia's regional power.
- **Problem-Solver Narrative:** A substantial segment of the population views Putin as capable of addressing Russia's challenges and fostering stability and order, a perspective likely nurtured by state-controlled media.
- **Absence of a Credible Alternative:** A significant portion of Russian popular support for Putin results from a perceived lack of viable alternatives. This dynamic suggests a degree of political resignation and a preference for the known over the uncertain.
- **Information Control and Demographic Echo Chambers:** Support for Putin is heavily concentrated among older Russians (55+), those who believe Russia is on the right track, and those who rely on state-controlled television for information (86 percent approval), which demonstrates the effectiveness of the Kremlin in shaping public opinion.

## Implications for Continued Military Operations

- **Sustained Political Capital:** Putin's high approval ratings give him significant political capital to continue the war effort, even while facing military setbacks and economic hardship. Domestic pressure for a negotiated settlement is likely to remain limited.
- **Limited Internal Opposition:** The lack of a strong, visible opposition movement—due to Kremlin suppression of dissent—minimizes internal challenges to Putin's leadership.
- **Reinforced Nationalist Narrative:** The state-controlled media apparatus will likely continue to reinforce a nationalist narrative, portraying the conflict as a defensive struggle against Western physical and cultural aggression. This will further solidify support for Putin.

## Implications for Negotiations

- **Reduced Incentive for Concession:** Putin's domestic strength reduces his incentive to make concessions. He can likely withstand prolonged conflict and economic pressure without facing substantial domestic backlash.
- **Potential for Hardline Bargaining:** A strong domestic position may embolden Putin to adopt a hardline negotiation stance, demanding potentially unacceptable concessions from Ukraine and the West.
- **Focus on Perceived Gains:** Any negotiated settlement will likely need to be framed by Putin as a victory for Russia, even if it involves territorial concessions or other compromises. Maintaining the perception of strength will remain paramount.

## OUTLOOK

Given current trends, Putin's popularity is likely to remain stable in the near to medium term. Only a significant military defeat or economic collapse will change this. This scenario suggests the conflict in Ukraine could continue for an extended period, with limited prospects for a swift or comprehensive resolution.

## SUPPORT FOR THE SMO

Support for the SMO increased to 78 percent in July, continuing a strong trend (above 70 percent) despite the protracted nature of the conflict.<sup>3</sup> The recent surge in support appears to be connected to perceived Russian military gains. The narrative of Russia as the dominant actor is significantly bolstering Putin's domestic position. The impact of the March Putin-Trump meeting in Alaska remains uncertain. However, the current momentum suggests continued, albeit potentially modulated, support for the war effort.

### Drivers of Increased Support for the SMO

- **Perceived Battlefield Successes:** Growing support for the SMO parallels rising reports of Russian gains in Ukraine and intensifying drone strikes against Ukrainian cities.<sup>4</sup> This pattern reinforces a narrative of Russian strength and effectiveness resonating with a population that historically favors displays of military prowess.<sup>5</sup> State-controlled media amplify this by focusing on Russian gains and minimizing setbacks.
- **Reinforced Dominance Narrative:** State media portray Russia as the dominant actor in the conflict, particularly as international efforts to negotiate a truce stall. This builds a sense of national pride and strength and reinforces the perception that Russia is asserting its rightful place on the world stage.<sup>6</sup>
- **Synergy with Putin's Approval:** People who approve of Putin overwhelmingly support the SMO (84 percent).
- **Feeling of Momentum:** A widespread belief that Russia is gaining ground is driving domestic support. This sense of forward momentum serves as a potent psychological force, helping to sustain public support for a prolonged military engagement.<sup>7</sup>

## Demographic Breakdown and Insights

- **Strongest Support Base:** Men (83 percent), older Russians (82 percent), those who believe Russia is on the right track (86 percent), wealthier Russians (81 percent), Muscovites (83 percent), Putin supporters (84 percent), and consumers of state-controlled television (86 percent) form the core of SMO support. These groups consistently show a preference for strong leadership, national pride, and a willingness to accept short-term economic hardship in pursuit of perceived long-term strategic gains.<sup>8</sup>
- **Areas of Lower Support:** consumers of YouTube (52 percent), those dissatisfied with Russia's direction (50 percent), and Putin detractors (35 percent) exhibit lower levels of support. These groups represent potential dissenting voices but are marginalized by state control of information and suppression of opposition. Low youth support suggests a growing generational disconnect.

## OUTLOOK

Unless battlefield fortunes change significantly or an economic crisis emerges, domestic support for the SMO is likely to remain robust (above 70 percent) in the near to medium term, bolstered by existing battlefield momentum and effective state control of information. Even a perceived diplomatic success could be framed by Russian state media as a validation of Russia's strength and strategic position, potentially reinforcing rather than diminishing support for the conflict.

## PERCEPTION OF SMO'S SUCCESS

Support for the SMO and Putin remains strong, but public perception of the operation's success dropped to 71 percent in July (down from 72 percent in May).<sup>9</sup> This subtle, yet important drop in confidence happens even as support for the war and Putin rises, suggesting a growing disconnect between Kremlin messaging and lived realities.

### Key Findings

- **Discrepancy Between Support and Success Perception:** Support for the Russia's so-called 'special military operation (SMO)' is rising while belief in its success is falling. This paradox may reflect deep-rooted national pride, allegiance to Putin, or psychological resistance to acknowledging defeat.<sup>10</sup>
- **Underlying Grievances:** A decline in perceived success of the SMO points to the emergence of deeper frustrations, such as economic strain, mounting casualties, and the drawn-out nature of the conflict—even among segments of the population that typically support Putin and the Kremlin.<sup>11</sup>
- **Diminished Expectations:** The slight dip in public confidence in the war effort appears linked to reasonably high support for negotiation. This may reflect waning enthusiasm for continued conflict and a growing realization that a conclusive victory is unlikely. War fatigue and dissonance are prompting a shift toward negotiation as a more tolerable and realistic path forward.

## Demographic Breakdown and Insights

- **Continued Optimism Among Core Supporters:** Men (76 percent), the wealthy (74 percent), Muscovites (79 percent), those who believe Russia is on the right track (81 percent), Putin supporters (76 percent), and state television consumers (81 percent) are significantly more likely to view the SMO as successful. These groups tend to align closely with official narratives and may interpret developments in Ukraine through a lens of national resilience and strategic progress. Their optimism suggests the war remains a source of patriotic affirmation and perceived geopolitical strength for many Russians.

- **Growing Disillusionment Among Vulnerable Groups:** In contrast, women (63 percent), respondents aged 40 to 54 (66 percent), the economically strained (64 percent), residents of large cities (64 percent), those dissatisfied with Russia's direction (41 percent), Putin detractors (30 percent), and YouTube consumers (50 percent) are more likely to think the SMO is faltering. These groups are more aware of the conflict's costs and express their rising doubts about its sustainability and impact. As their concerns grow, public expectations may shift, with increasing openness to alternative approaches such as negotiation or de-escalation.

Taken together, these contrasting viewpoints illustrate how evolving attitudes among different segments of the Russian population may influence the country's ongoing strategy in Ukraine.

## OUTLOOK

Despite continued domestic support for the war and Putin, the slight decline in perceived success of the SMO suggests growing public fatigue and a recalibration of expectations. This shift, coupled with high support for negotiations, may signal a turning point in Russia's approach. The Kremlin remains rhetorically committed to military objectives. However, recent signals such as renewed emphasis on the 2022 Istanbul negotiation framework and calls for security guarantees indicate that Russia may increasingly lean on diplomatic channels to consolidate gains and seek a negotiated settlement on its own terms.<sup>12</sup> Strategically, this could harden territorial control, intensify hybrid warfare across Europe, and deepen alliances with China and the Global South to offset Western pressure. The real outlook is one of dual-track maneuvering: continued military engagement paired with selective diplomatic overtures, aimed at shaping a post-conflict order favorable to Russian interests.

## SUPPORT FOR NEGOTIATION

As of mid-2025, a clear majority of Russians (63 percent) favor peace negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, marking an increase from previous years.<sup>13</sup> This shift toward negotiation coincides with intensified Russian military activity and mounting international pressure for a ceasefire, suggesting a growing sense of war fatigue within the Russian population. These trends underscore a deeper societal divide in Russia regarding the perceived goals and costs of the war, revealing how identity, geography, and political alignment shape attitudes toward conflict resolution.

### Demographic Breakdown and Insights

- **Demographic Divides:** July polling reveals stark demographic divides in Russian public opinion regarding the war. These divisions reflect differences in lived experience and media consumption and broader ideological and generational fault lines within Russian society.
- **Groups Supporting Negotiation:** Support for peace negotiations is strongest among women (69 percent), Russians under 24 years old (75 percent), those with lower education (68 percent), rural residents (69 percent), those dissatisfied with Russia's direction (76 percent), dis approvers of Putin (78 percent), and consumers of YouTube (75 percent). These groups tend to be more sensitive to the human costs of war, more skeptical of official narratives, and more open to alternative sources of information. Their support for negotiation reflects a desire for stability, reform, and a break from militarized nationalism.
- **Groups Supporting Continued Military Operations:** This is in sharp contrast to those comprising a strong, optimistic support base for the SMO (please see “**Strongest Support Base**” and “**Continued Optimism Among Core Supporters**” sections above). These individuals are more likely to trust state media, accept the Kremlin's framing of the conflict, and benefit from the existing political and economic system.

## OUTLOOK

Growing support for negotiations indicates a shift in public tolerance for prolonged conflict, which may pressure policymakers to consider diplomatic alternatives. This trend reflects a population increasingly aware of war's costs, while the divide between younger, digitally connected Russians and older, traditional citizens means that public opinion is not uniform; there will be different interpretations of the conflict's future developments.

## INTERNAL CHALLENGES

*The sociocultural dynamics of the Russia-Ukraine war indicate that both sides face rising internal challenges. In Russia, increasing public disillusionment and a desire for negotiation may undermine domestic support for Putin and the SMO, with any settlement likely needing to be framed as a Russian victory. For Ukraine, even*

*a successful conclusion to the war would necessitate reconstruction, demilitarization in non-defense sectors, societal rehabilitation from war-induced trauma, and workforce reintegration.*

## UKRAINE'S NONMATERIAL POSTWAR CHALLENGES

*Ukraine faces immense postwar challenges that will require a multilateral, sustained effort to ensure postwar reconstruction and rehabilitation. Three emerging dynamics threaten to undermine Ukrainian national resilience: the widespread militarization of society and proliferation of weapons across the country since the 2022 invasion, societal trauma exacerbated by disrupted families and unaddressed psychological harm, and a significant brain drain of skilled young professionals seeking opportunities abroad.*

### Militarization of Society and Proliferation of Weapons

*A long-term challenge for Ukraine will be demilitarizing a society that has equated resilience with armament. Civil-military relations may be strained as security forces confront illicit arms markets and private militias. Meanwhile, Russian information operations are likely to exploit societal tensions, portraying Ukraine as a failed state plagued by lawlessness.*

*Beyond the surge in defense spending and domestic arms production, the prolonged war has militarized nearly all segments of Ukrainian society, manifested in a growing military preparedness across most of the population.* Until 2022, most Ukrainians held a dim view of their military, and draft-dodging of Ukraine's inherited Soviet-era conscription was rampant.

- Since 2014, Ukraine has been awash with so-called “volunteer battalions” of various persuasions, though some were disbanded, integrated into Ukraine’s Ministry of Defense (MOD), or mostly just deployed in the Donbas. Russia used this to widely propagandize that far-right volunteer groups like the Azov group were



Source: <https://tinyurl.com/2r5rfmf2/>

(and are) radicalizing Ukrainians in militaristic ways.<sup>a</sup>

- Support for the military increased significantly after February 2022. Among state and public institutions, the armed forces enjoy 95 percent trust, according to a 2024 Razumkov Center/USAID poll.<sup>14</sup> However, distrust of other government institutions remains high.<sup>15</sup>
- With 1.2 million reserve soldiers as of 2025, out of a prewar population of approximately 43.5 million, a significant portion of the population either directly fought in or supported the war.<sup>16</sup>



Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:In\\_Lviv,\\_Volodymyr\\_Zelenskyy\\_and\\_Mette\\_Frederiksen\\_honored\\_the\\_memory\\_of\\_the\\_fallen\\_defenders\\_of\\_Ukraine.\\_\(53724191619\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:In_Lviv,_Volodymyr_Zelenskyy_and_Mette_Frederiksen_honored_the_memory_of_the_fallen_defenders_of_Ukraine._(53724191619).jpg)

***The proliferation of small arms poses challenges to rebuilding Ukraine's postwar society: The normalization of violence over the course of the war and increased criminal activity while governance is reestablished in former war zones may create anarchic conditions.*** While many firearms are legally held by territorial defense forces, veterans, and volunteer battalions, the sheer volume of weapons—as many as 5 million—has overwhelmed state tracking mechanisms. Estimates suggest that tens of thousands of small arms remain unaccounted for, raising concerns about Ukraine's future internal security risks, including organized crime, political (and interpersonal) violence, and paramilitary vigilantism.<sup>17</sup>

- Before the full-scale invasion in 2022, civilian firearm ownership in Ukraine was relatively low, with around six percent of households possessing firearms. The war saw a spike in firearms entering the country from abroad, with some estimates suggesting that civilians may possess between one and five million weapons.<sup>18</sup>
- Ukraine's MOD has begun pilot programs to reintegrate volunteer battalions into formal state structures and collect surplus arms—like disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs implemented in postwar countries like Colombia—but results have been



Source: <https://tinyurl.com/389dd299>

<sup>a</sup> In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and led a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine, Ukraine's military was largely outdated and ineffective. However, it rebounded from this situation largely with the help of volunteer fighters. Many volunteer units emerged during the Euromaidan uprising and fought effectively against the separatists and Russians but were never fully absorbed or integrated into the regular army. Ukraine's struggles with the integration of volunteers led many politicians and oligarchs to use these units as private armies—for settling political and business scores—while other volunteers turned to criminal activities. However, a few of the volunteer units such as the Azov regiment, which helped to recapture Mariupol in 2014, were fully integrated into the Ministry of Interior. SOURCE: "Ukraine's toughest fight: The challenge of military reform." *Caregie Endowment for International Peace*, 22 February 2018.

uneven.<sup>19, b, c</sup> Many civilians continue to keep weapons for personal protection amid fears of renewed Russian aggression or domestic instability. This has fueled a growing “armed citizen” ethos across urban and rural populations, especially in oblasts closer to the front lines.

## Psychological Trauma and Fractured Families

***Ukraine is undergoing a slow-motion mental health crisis. More than three years into full-scale war, millions of Ukrainians—especially children, veterans, and internally displaced individuals—are experiencing sustained psychological trauma.***

- UN International Children’s Fund estimates over 1.5 million children may suffer from war-related PTSD symptoms, while Ukrainian Ministry of Health data show a fourfold increase in adult mental health consultations since 2022.<sup>20, 21</sup> Another study found that over 40 percent of the population suffered from depression symptoms, while almost 15 percent showed PTSD symptoms.<sup>22</sup> Still, some of the findings are surprising and even counterintuitive. For instance, a 2023 report by the National Institutes of Health found that those who stayed in Ukraine suffered from lower levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and trauma-related symptoms compared to Ukrainians who fled abroad.<sup>23</sup>
- Though Kyiv has increased mental health resources for Ukrainians, significant gaps remain, particularly in rural areas and regions formerly under occupation. Civil society and international NGOs have stepped in, but fragmented efforts have so far fallen short of systemic needs. Russian propaganda has begun to exploit reports of suicide, domestic violence, and depression to paint a picture of Ukrainian societal collapse—especially in Russian-speaking regions in the east.<sup>24</sup>
- A common feature of wars is family separations, particularly due to mass mobilization of males and civilian



Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/Transfer\\_of\\_civilians\\_from\\_Irpin\\_to\\_Kyiv\\_due\\_to\\_Russian\\_attacks.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/Transfer_of_civilians_from_Irpin_to_Kyiv_due_to_Russian_attacks.jpg)

evacuations, which leaves emotional scars on younger generations. Many children have grown up without knowing their fathers, while women-led households face economic uncertainty and social isolation. Veterans often return home to weakened social support systems and lack sufficient access to trauma-informed care. Evidence from the Balkan wars suggests rates of PTSD can linger decades after the war ends and can also be intergenerational, with trauma-like symptoms passed from parents to their children.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>b</sup> After more than 50 years of conflict, Colombia signed a peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016. Even before the peace agreement, Colombia had implemented several rounds of a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process with various guerilla movements and another started with the FARC in 2016, with the government creating a series of twenty-six cantonments—or so-called “concentration zones”—for ex-fighters to disarm and rehabilitate themselves, with various levels of success. This resulted in significant lessons learned for future implementation of DDR. SOURCE: Lionel Beehner and Liam Collins, “Welcome to the Jungle: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Colombia,” *Modern War Institute*, May 23, 2019, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/WELCOME-TO-THE-JUNGLE.pdf>

<sup>c</sup> Registration remains voluntary, and a significant portion of firearm owners have not registered their weapons.

## Brain Drain of Skilled Professionals

***Ukraine's postwar recovery will depend heavily on its human capital, yet an accelerating brain drain threatens to deplete the country's pool of talented professionals.***

Since February 2022, an estimated 8 million Ukrainians have fled abroad, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with a disproportionate number being university-educated professionals and skilled workers (47 percent, compared to 24 percent of the general population).<sup>26</sup> To put these figures into perspective, Ukraine's brain drain is 17 times worse than Russia's, factoring in the percentage of migrants with a university degree. Many of these emigres have found employment and built new lives in Poland, Germany, and other industrialized economies.

- Among the most affected sectors are health care, engineering, IT, and public administration. Hospitals struggle to retain experienced staff, while reconstruction efforts are hampered by a lack of qualified civil engineers and planners. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics talent shortages also impact military-related research and development.<sup>27</sup>
- Programs aimed at encouraging return migration have yielded limited success so far. Evidence suggests that fostering greater interconnectivity, even if only online, between expatriates and the domestic economy can yield higher numbers of repatriated refugees in certain sectors, as evidenced by post-Cold War outflows of ex-Yugoslavians to Germany.<sup>28</sup> Financial incentives can also help. The challenge is that Russia is also actively targeting Ukrainian specialists with offers of work and resettlement, compounding the strategic loss.

***The longer the war drags on and recovery remains uncertain, the more permanent this exodus may become. Left unaddressed, this trend could leave Ukraine critically under-resourced in key sectors, including high-tech and financial industries, thereby delaying economic stabilization and reconstruction. NATO and EU allies may need to coordinate a “return and rebuild” strategy, offering not just robust financial incentives for resettlement and professional reintegration, but other inducements to reverse the outflow.***<sup>29</sup>

# CONCLUSION

## Addressing the Scars of a Shellshocked Postwar Ukraine

*As the war's kinetic phase evolves into a drawn-out geopolitical and economic struggle, the human dimension of Ukraine's survival will become paramount. Addressing the arms glut, healing societal trauma, and reversing its deficit of human capital will be as vital to rebuilding Ukraine as the provision of international development assistance. All are a vital part of Ukraine's postwar efforts to rebuild its*

*infrastructure, consolidate democracy, reintegrate into Europe, and deter future Russian aggression.* The financial cost of rebuilding a postwar Ukraine will exceed \$1 trillion, according to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.<sup>30</sup> Yet that figure does not account for the non-material challenges, which are immense. Ukraine's battlefield resilience has not yet translated into societal cohesion, given the shock of war on a country divided by language, culture, religion, and identity.

# IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. ARMY

## Proliferation of Weapons and Militarization of Society

- **Disarmament Challenges:** Postwar Ukraine will face persistent risks from the widespread circulation of small arms, making disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) efforts critical but difficult to implement.
- **Illicit Arms Networks:** Without effective monitoring, black-market weapons circulation could fuel paramilitary groups, organized crime, and possible Russian mercenary activity.
- **Civil-Military Relations:** Weak oversight and blurred boundaries between military and civilian authority could destabilize postwar governance.

## Mental Health and Social Reintegration

- **PTSD and Reintegration Strains:** High levels of trauma among veterans and civilians will complicate reintegration, potentially affecting workforce participation and political stability.
- **Mental Health Service Gaps:** Insufficient capacity, especially in rural and newly liberated regions, will leave populations vulnerable to untreated psychological effects of war.
- **Displacement and Child Welfare:** Prolonged separation of families and disrupted childhood education will create long-term social cohesion and demographic challenges.

## Strategic Effects of Brain Drain

- **Talent Loss Risks:** Continued emigration of professionals threatens Ukraine's ability to rebuild critical

sectors such as engineering, medicine, and defense R&D.

- **Diaspora Engagement:** While the Ukrainian diaspora offers valuable expertise, its integration into reconstruction efforts will likely be uneven and technologically dependent.
- **Defense Education Needs:** Failure to invest in defense and technical education risks leaving Ukraine reliant on external expertise for modernization.

## Strategic Competition in the Reconstruction Space

- **Adversarial Influence Over Ukraine's Human Capital:** Agencies should closely monitor and mitigate Russian efforts to co-opt skilled Ukrainian labor or undermine social cohesion through information operations.
- **Nonmaterial Risks in Security Cooperation:** Trauma, an armed populace inured to violence, and population loss will complicate theater security cooperation.

## Multilateral, Multiagency Approaches to Peacebuilding

- **Coordination Demands:** Competing security and development agendas between Ukraine, its allies, and international organizations will hinder effective reconstruction and security.
- **Narrative Competition:** Ukraine's national unity and resilience will depend on its ability to craft and sustain a coherent strategic narrative in the face of Russian disinformation and influence operations.

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## ENDNOTES

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