

Cecilia Smitt Meyer, SITE

Anders Olofsgård, SITE

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# Liberal Values in Ukraine Days Before the 2022 Invasion

Just weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the European Social Survey completed the 10<sup>th</sup> round of data collection on public attitudes and beliefs in Ukraine. This policy brief examines regional variation in liberal values such as attitudes toward democracy and the EU, based on that data. While respondents in Eastern Ukraine were more skeptical of democracy and EU integration, they did not consistently reject liberal social values to a greater extent than respondents in other parts of the country. The most striking divide however lies in institutional trust, which was significantly lower in Eastern Ukraine. This suggests that trust in institutions, which may have been further negatively impacted by prolonged exposure to violence since 2014, underlie the observed regional differences in attitudes towards democracy and the EU. Understanding these differences is vital for policymakers navigating Ukraine's reform and EU accession process.

## Introduction

It has been well documented that values in post-communist countries in Eastern Europe on average tend to be more authoritarian, more nationalistic, more in favor of state intervention in the economy, and more skeptical towards sexual and ethnic minorities and foreigners than in Western Europe (e.g., Roland 2012). Behind the averages, however, there is substantial variation in values across subgroups of populations. Even before the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion, a discussion on regional Ukrainian differences in relation to democratic values, the wish for EU integration, and similar liberal attitudes existed, both in and outside of the country.

The path towards a closer relationship with Europe and the EU started already in 2014, but since February 2022, Ukraine has politically positioned itself even closer to the EU – and an EU accession process is now underway. However, for a successful reform process in Ukraine, how public opinion is shaped and whether attitudes and values converge towards those of the EU will be important (Olofsgård et al. 2024).

With this in mind, this policy brief provides a descriptive account of public liberal values in Ukraine by analyzing data from the 10<sup>th</sup> round of the European Social Survey (ESS) conducted just weeks before the full-scale invasion on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 2022. Some of the differences we observe are likely long-standing and related to differences in language preferences and cultural and informational exposure from Russia and the EU, respectively. Yet, given the exposure to instability and conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine since 2014, we also discuss the role that exposure to

conflict may have played in explaining several attitudinal dimensions, including satisfaction with democracy, support for liberal social values, attitudes toward Europe and EU integration, as well as levels of trust.

## Data

The **ESS round 10 data** was collected through face-to-face interviews in Ukraine between January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022, and February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022. The nationally representative survey focuses on public attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and includes questions on opinions on democracy, the EU, and similar topics commonly considered to capture liberal views.

## ESS Sample Characteristics

The sample consisted of more women than men (about 59 percent and 41 percent, respectively). While the Ukrainian population is well-educated, most still find it difficult (41 percent) or very difficult (32 percent) to live comfortably on their income. 11.5 percent of the sample was unemployed, while 31 percent were retired. Broken down by location, most average outcomes are similar, albeit with the East displaying somewhat lower levels of education and greater income difficulties (see Figure 1 for an illustration of what oblasts (regions) are included in each geographical unit). Unemployment was, however, substantially higher in the West (about 15 percent), while the share of retirees was lower (26 percent).

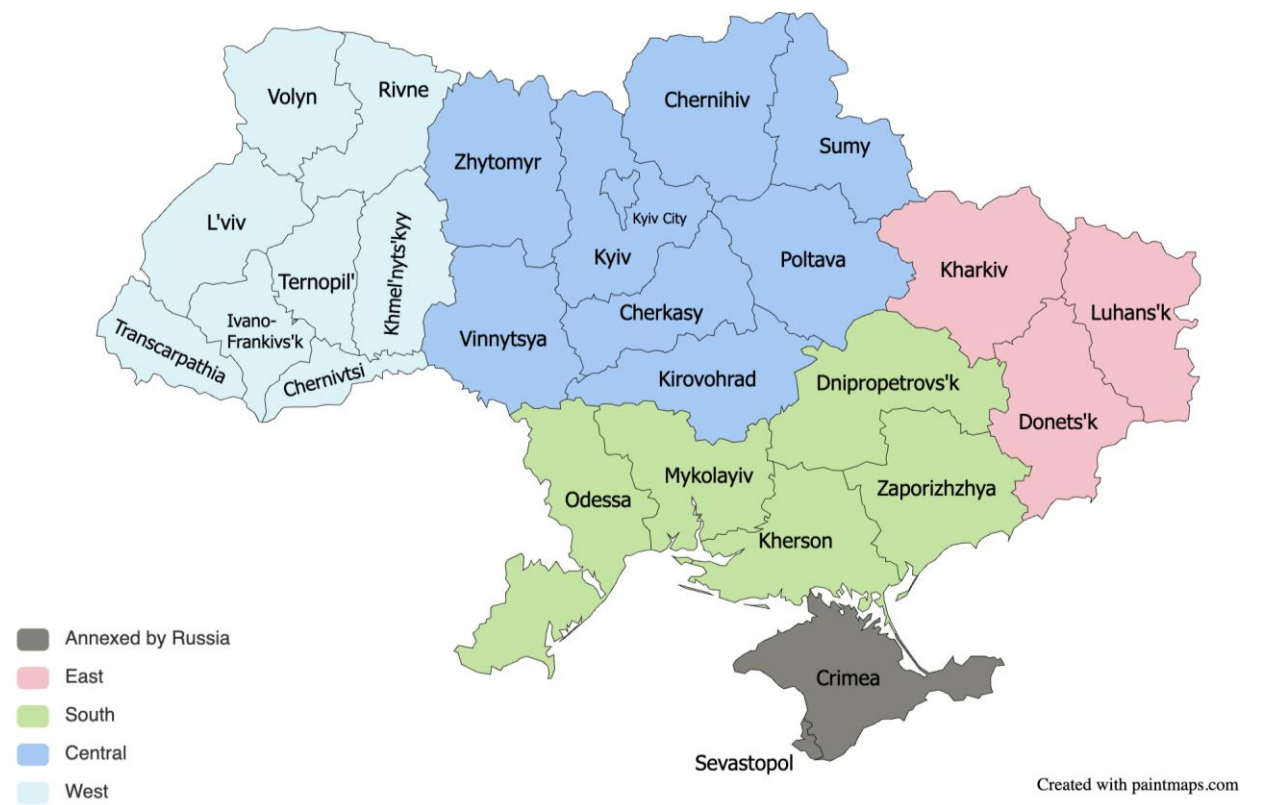
Some heterogeneity exists when it comes to belonging to a religious denomination. In the Central and South, around 63 percent state they belong to a church/mosque/synagogue, etc. The East is roughly at par with the national average (70 and 69.5 percent, respectively), while this figure is



82 percent in the Western part of the country. Similarly, there are major differences in the language one most often speaks at home. In the country as a whole, 13.4 percent stated they speak both Ukrainian and Russian at home. In the East, this figure was as high as 27.1 percent, displaying

the duality in mother tongue in this part of Ukraine. The corresponding figure for the West was 3.3 percent. On the contrary, 92.4 percent marked that they most often speak only Ukrainian at home in the West, whereas this figure was only 5.2 percent in the East.

*Figure 1. Geographical Classification of Ukraine's Oblasts*



Note: The map depicts the ESS coverage at the time of data collection, excluding Crimea and Sevastopol – illegally annexed by Russia since 2014.

## Key Variables of Interest

To understand the views on liberal values, ESS responses to questions in the following areas have been considered:

I. Merits of democracy: satisfaction with the way democracy works; importance of living in a democratic country. II. Liberal democratic values: agreement with statements such as “gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish”; attitudes towards the merits of obedience,

respect for authority, and loyalty towards leaders; attitudes towards immigrants. III. Opinions about Europe and the EU: support for further EU integration; emotional attachment to Europe; vote intention in a hypothetical EU referendum.

## Regional Differences

There are some clear regional divides in attitudes toward democracy, liberal values, and EU integration across Ukraine in the weeks leading up to the full-scale Russian invasion. These differences are particularly pronounced between Eastern



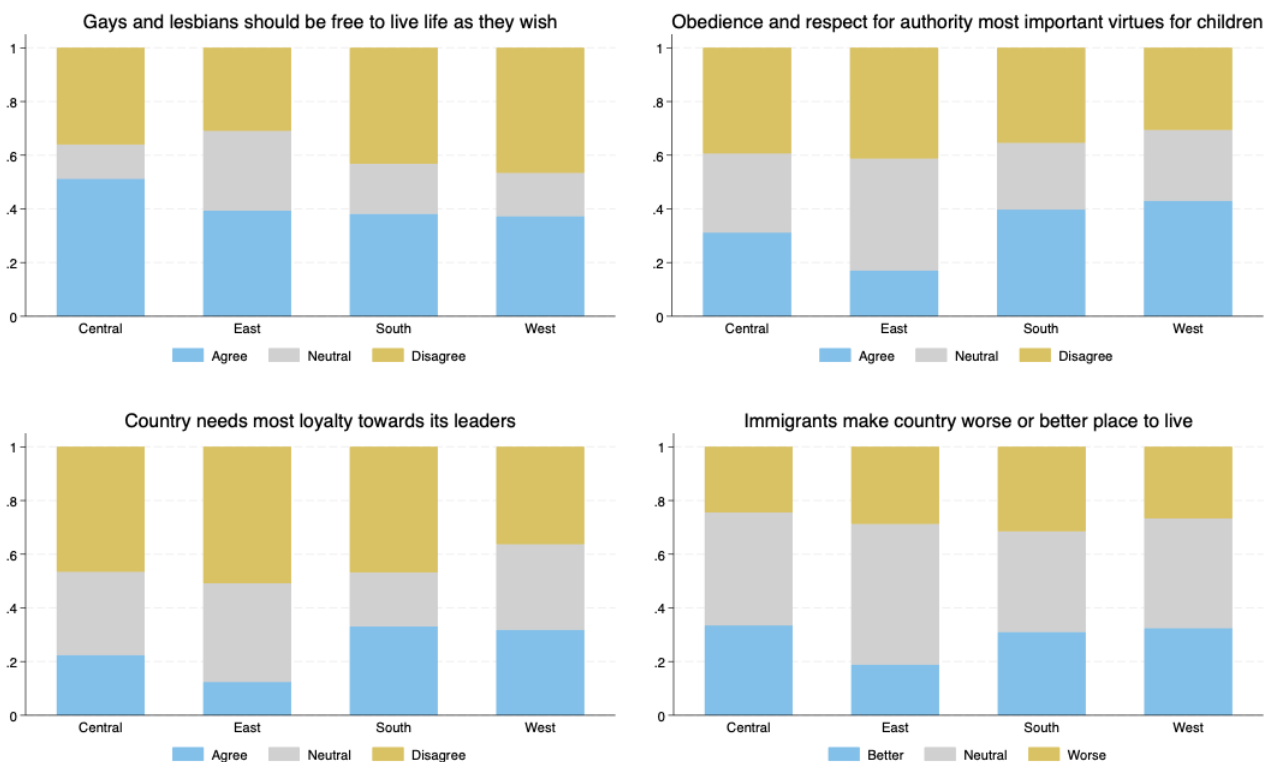
Ukraine and the Center, South, and West – though not uniformly in the same direction.

On democratic commitment, only 37 percent of respondents in the East considered it “extremely important” to live in a democratically governed country. This was about 16 percentage points lower than the national average. When categories were grouped into low, medium, and high importance, the East still trailed the national average by about 10 percentage points (about 67.5 and 75 percent, respectively). Similarly, satisfaction with democracy is the lowest among respondents from the East (about 6 percent compared to a national average, including the East, of 11 percent). Geographical differences are evident also in the responses to the question on whether it is acceptable for a country to have a strong leader above the law. A smaller share rejected this in the

East (about 30 percent compared to the national average of 37 percent).

However, the East stood out in the other direction on some core liberal values, as depicted in Figure 2. It had the lowest share disagreeing with LGBT rights (31 percent vs. 40 percent nationally), the weakest support for teaching children obedience (17 percent), and the highest rejection of it (41 percent). Further, only 12 percent in the East agreed that “the country needs most loyalty towards its leaders,” compared to 26 percent nationally. This question could reflect one’s view on the current leadership, warranting some caution in the interpretation. On immigration, however, the East was less liberal: only 19 percent saw immigrants as having a positive impact, versus about 30 percent nationally.

*Figure 2. Attitudes toward democracy, liberal values, and EU integration across Ukraine*



Source: Authors’ creation from ESS.



The sharpest regional divide between the East and other regions concerns attitudes toward Europe and EU membership. In a hypothetical referendum, 73 percent of respondents in the East said they would vote to remain outside of the EU, compared to 47 percent in the South, 23 percent in the Central, and just 11 percent in the West. Support for further European unification was also substantially lower in the East, with only about 17 percent in favor of further unification, as compared to the almost 50 percent national average. Similarly, emotional attachment to Europe is substantially lower among respondents from the East, with nearly all respondents stating low or medium attachment only – figures that nearly invert those of respondents from the West of Ukraine.

## The Role of Trust

Turning to the measures of trust, the East clearly stands out. Trust in the parliament, the police, political parties, politicians, and the legal system was substantially lower among respondents from the East (in the ranges of 5 to 15 percentage points more respondents answering they had a low level of trust in said institutions than the national average). When asked about trust in the United Nations, the East also stood out with more than 50 percent stating low trust compared to the national average of about 37. The same pattern holds also when asked about the European Parliament – 73 percent compared to the national average of about 44 percent – stated low trust. Respondents from the South also displayed lower levels of trust across all measures but the deviations from the average are about half as big as the East.

When asked whether people can generally be trusted, or one can't be too careful the East did not

stand out in this way, underpinning how distrust is strongly directed toward institutions, both national and international.

## Conflict Exposure

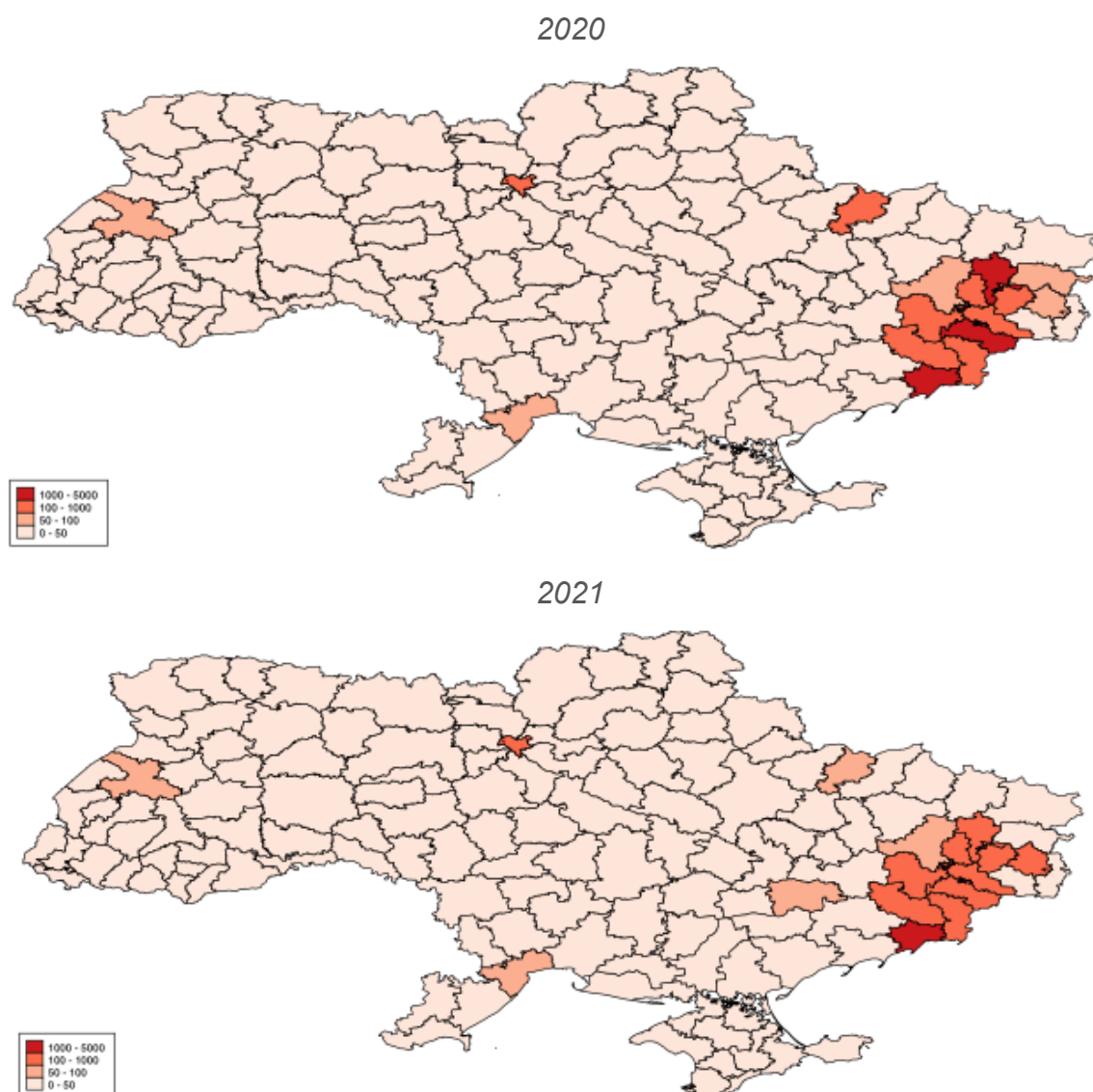
Figure 3 details the conflict intensity in the last two years leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As can be seen, incidences of violence are concentrated in the Donbass area, including the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. While not marked by similar levels of active conflict, Kharkiv oblast – also part of the East classification – borders areas with high levels of conflict intensity in the Donbass, as well as Russia in the east.

It should be noted that the map also depicts strategic deployments and political unrest, such as demonstrations, explaining the prevalence of "conflict" also in a few other places in Ukraine prior to February 2022. The occurrences of such incidences are, however, far less than those in Luhansk oblast and Donetsk oblast at the time. An important piece of information is that the intensity pattern holds for the time **Armed Conflict and Location Data** for Ukraine has been available (2018), i.e. individuals situated in the East have been exposed to incidences of violence over a prolonged period of time.

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Figure 3. Conflict intensity in Ukraine, by raion



Source: Authors' creation from [Armed Conflict and Location Data](#).

pattern holds for the time [Armed Conflict and Location Data](#) for Ukraine has been available (2018), i.e. individuals situated in the East have been exposed to incidences of violence over a prolonged period of time.

This raises the question whether this exposure to violence may have contributed to increased differences in trust in institutions and support for democracy and the EU beyond what was already there before 2014. The most immediate effect probably comes from selective migration, i.e., that

individuals who remain in the eastern regions in early 2022 despite the violence since 2014 may be those who, on average, are more skeptical of the Ukrainian government and its tilt away from the authoritarian Russia and towards the EU. But previous literature and recent studies on Ukraine suggest that there may also be a direct effect coming from exposure to violence on an individual's attitudes. This relationship has recently been mapped by Obrizan (2025). A key finding is that military solutions are preferred in the segment of the population that has experienced hardship



and personal losses since the full-scale invasion in 2022.

More generally, any kind of trust - including the interpersonal one - can be affected by exposure to conflict. The relationship is complicated, and in some instances, violence can cause more pro-social attitudes and behavior. An important distinction, however, is that exposure to violence amplifies the distinctions in attitudes and behavior towards members of in- and out-groups (Olofsgård, 2025). This suggests that conflict may have further increased the differences between the East of Ukraine and the rest of the country, if many residents in the former perceive national and western institutions as being dominated by groups they do not feel strong attachments to.

Further, terror management theory (e.g., Landau et al. 2004) suggests that fear induces support for charismatic and strong leadership. In a context where liberal democracy is not everywhere well enough entrenched, this may tilt over into support for more authoritarian leadership in response to attacks triggering stronger emotions of fear. Furthermore, work by Feldman and Stenner (1997) shows that the impact of perceived societal threat on triggering stronger authoritarian preferences can depend on authoritarian predispositions. The latter is measured by, e.g., looking at attitudes towards child rearing and emphasis on obedience. In the context of the finding above, this would imply that the impact of violence on authoritarian preferences would be weaker in the eastern parts of Ukraine, compared to the rest of the country, a potentially interesting avenue for future research.

## Conclusions

The findings in this policy brief nuance simple narratives about regional divides in Ukraine. While dissatisfaction with democracy and skepticism toward the EU are more common in the East, this does not necessarily correspond to a general rejection of liberal social values. In some cases — such as attitudes toward child-rearing, authority, and LGBT rights — respondents from the East even express more liberal views than elsewhere.

Not explicitly discussed in the brief is the topic of mother tongue. The data shows that Russian speakers are less emotionally attached to Europe and less supportive of EU integration. Yet, there is no consistent evidence that Russian speakers are less committed to liberal democratic values overall. The effect of language is difficult to disentangle from geography, particularly given the concentration of Russian speakers in Eastern Ukraine.

What does stand out more clearly is that trust and the general view on institutions is substantially lower and more negative in the East. Respondents from the East consistently report lower trust in national and international political institutions. Interestingly, this pattern does not extend to generalized social trust — the East does not differ markedly from the rest of the country. This contrast suggests a more focused skepticism directed at formal institutions, rather than widespread social distrust. One possible explanation, as discussed in Olofsgård (2025), is that when exposed to conflict and violence, interpersonal trust may reflect confidence in one's in-group, while institutional trust hinges on feeling represented within the broader political system. If respondents from the



East perceive themselves as excluded from the national or European in-group, this could explain their lower levels of trust in both domestic and international institutions, and exposure to violence may have further amplified this. While signs of such alienation appear in the data, one should refrain from drawing too strong conclusions from this alone. Another possible explanation is that prolonged exposure to violence has eroded confidence in the government's ability to protect citizens, and in the effectiveness of EU support, which would turn support away from the EU option preferred by the current government. Future research on the effects of war exposure should more carefully disentangle the various aspects and forms of trust and how they relate to liberal values in Ukraine. Rebuilding institutional trust remains a key challenge. In this context, instilling peace and decentralizing political power may be essential for increasing trust in the Eastern part of the country, if that helps residents in the East to identify with public institutions. As Ukraine advances on its path toward EU membership, fostering a shared sense of national belonging will be critical in overcoming the narrative of an East–West divide when rebuilding the country.

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## Cecilia Smitt Meyer

Cecilia Smitt Meyer holds a M.Sc. in Economics from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), a B.Sc. in Economics and a B.Sc. in Political Science from the University of Gothenburg.

Cecilia worked as a full-time Research Assistant for the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE) between 2022 and 2025. As of August 2025 she works as an analyst at the government offices. Cecilia's research interests are mainly in gender, political and development economics.



## Anders Olofsgård

Stockholm Institute of transition Economics  
[anders.olofsgard@hhs.se](mailto:anders.olofsgard@hhs.se)

<https://www.hhs.se/en/persons/o/olofsgard-anders/>

Anders Olofsgård is currently Deputy Director at the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE) and Associate Professor at the Stockholm School of Economics. Before that, he was Associate Professor at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. He earned his Ph.D. in Economics from the Institute for International Economic Studies (IIES), at Stockholm University, in 2001. Olofsgård's primary research areas are political economy, development and applied microeconomics, and he has published widely in both economics and political science journals. He has also been a visiting scholar at the research department of the IMF and done work for among others the World Bank, USAID and the Swedish Parliament.

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