

University Student Assessments of the War in Ukraine: Results of a Ukrainian-German Survey Study

*Valeriia Sazonova, Taras Tsymbal (both Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv) and
Thomas Hinz* (University of Konstanz)*

**Corresponding author (thomas.hinz@uni-konstanz.de)*

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The massive Russian attack on Ukraine has affected the lives of people around the world. This applies to the global security order, energy prices, food availability and affordability, political stability, and much more. The recurrence of warfare in Europe has thus created a situation that fosters the spread of authoritarian attitudes among various segments of the population. According to Canadian psychologist Bob Altemeyer, especially in times of crisis, people tend to seek protection in authority and rely on its help, even if this comes at the expense of personal rights or freedoms (Altemeyer 2006). Based on our survey conducted simultaneously among students from Konstanz and Kyiv in the summer of 2022, we can use two psychological authoritarianism scales to compare how students in Germany and Kyiv perceive the level of danger in each case and how this affects their authoritarian attitudes: Oesterreich's Authoritarianism Scale (Oesterreich 2005) and the Very Short Authoritarianism Scale (VSA) (Bizumic and Duckitt 2018), which is a shortened reformulation of Altemeyer's Right Wing Authoritarianism Scale. In addition, students were asked about their opinions on the war in Ukraine. A total of 1,194 students from Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and 956 students from the University of Konstanz participated in the survey. Due to differences in the demographic structure of the universities in both countries, the German students surveyed are on average about four years older (23.7 years) than the Ukrainian students (19.8 years).

The survey was conducted between June 21 and July 18, 2022, after Ukraine had successfully pushed back the Russian spring offensive on Kyiv but before the Ukrainian counteroffensive in September and October. Thus, the survey occurred during a period when the Ukrainian population in general had already gained confidence in the ability of the Ukrainian army to resist Russian aggression, although their optimism had been dampened by Russia's advance on Ukrainian positions on the eastern front and had not yet been strengthened by the counteroffensive in the north and south of the country.

Authoritarianism is understood in this study as an attitude of obeying authority and seeking the support of the strongest in a situation of danger and uncertainty. Given the immediate experience of war in Ukraine, we expected the Kyiv students surveyed to score higher on both authoritarianism scales than the Konstanz students surveyed. Thus, the hypothesis arose that Ukrainian students would exhibit higher levels of authoritarian attitudes because they are in an unstable dangerous situation and have themselves experienced atrocities of war.

This expectation was indeed confirmed. The Kyiv students were more inclined toward authoritarianism by 0.2 scale points (scale range of -3 to 3) on the Oesterreich scale and by 0.8 scale points (scale range of -2 to 2) on the VSA scale than the Konstanz students, both differences being statistically significant ($p < .001$). To hold the influence of age constant, we compared only 20-year-olds from both universities as the strongest birth cohort in the survey, and the result was almost identical: 0.2 scale points on the Oesterreich scale and 0.7 scale points on the VSA scale ($p < .001$). A more sophisticated analysis of the results on authoritarianism will be published elsewhere. Just a note here that, interestingly, both samples were significantly lower than the mean values of the authoritarianism scales calibrated

according to other samples. Students are thus less inclined toward authoritarianism than the population average.

We also asked students to assess the extent to which they are afraid of a new world war, military activities in European countries, their own death, the death of family members or friends, food shortages/starvation, persistently high inflation, and a worsening of their economic situation. Students from Kyiv are more likely than students from Konstanz to say they are afraid of the death of family members or friends (86% vs. 21%), of a world war (52% vs. 41%), of food shortages/starvation (51% vs. 39%), and of their own death (38% vs. 4%). In contrast, Constance students showed more fear of persistently high inflation (69% vs. 47%) and of the war spreading to other European countries (60% vs. 35%).

Surprisingly, there is no correlation between the fears recorded in the survey and the scores on the authoritarianism scales among Ukrainian students. All correlations between anxiety and measured authoritarianism scores were weak (i.e., ranging from values of -0.1 to 0.1), contradicting our original assumption based on Altemeyer's theory. The Konstanz students, on the other hand, showed a statistically significant ($p < .001$) but low correlation only between authoritarianism and fear of worsening one's economic situation (0.12 and 0.14 on the VSA and Oesterreich scales, respectively). This lack of correlation can be explained by the fact that the respondents in Ukraine and Germany are in a distinct but within the respective social context rather homogeneous situation of danger, so that the correlation between authoritarianism and fears is overlaid by the respective shared background of experience. And this was precisely the motivation for the comparative design of our survey, which covers two fundamentally different samples with different contexts. Among Ukrainian respondents, the distribution of fears is clearly skewed toward the upper end of the scale compared to German respondents. Not surprisingly, Ukrainian respondents have higher overall levels of anxiety (calculated as the mean of all individual anxiety scores) than German respondents (3.37 vs. 2.94, $t(2038) = 12.5$, $p < .001$).

Thus, when the samples are pooled, some expected correlations become apparent. In particular, VSA scores correlate positively with fear of one's own death ($r(2027) = .20$, $p < .001$) and fear of death of a family member or friend ($r(2033) = .30$, $p < .001$). Fears of a new world war, a worsening of their own economic situation, food shortages, high inflation and military activities in European countries, on the other hand, correlate only very weakly with authoritarianism. It can be assumed that these (secondary) fears are less pronounced in the perception of Ukrainian students, as they are confronted with immediate dangers of an existential nature.

In order to investigate students' opinions about Ukrainian society and the causes of the violent conflict, an additional block of questions about the situation in Ukraine was included in our survey. Not surprisingly, German students find it more difficult to express an opinion on this and much more often choose the options "hard to say" or "don't know".

First, students were asked to assess the extent to which each of the following countries is to blame for the fact that there is a war in Ukraine. The surveyed students from both countries consider Russia to be the main culprit: 99% of respondents in Ukraine and 96% of respondents in Germany state this. Interestingly, respondents from Kyiv more often cite that they consider the U.S., other European countries, and even Ukraine to be partly to blame for the war.

For all other questions, the answers of Kyiv and Konstanz students differ greatly. On the question of humanitarian support, slightly less than 40% of German students say that they do not want to pass judgment on this, while the majority of Ukrainian students consider humanitarian support from all countries to be appropriate - an exception is shown in the question about humanitarian support from

Germany. The opinion about German humanitarian support divides the respondents from both countries into three roughly equal groups. The answers from Ukraine are distributed among the options sufficient (33%), don't know (18%) and insufficient (37%). A third of German students also believe that their country's humanitarian support is insufficient (31%).

With regard to military support, the picture is different. Students from Ukraine generally rate military support from countries as less appropriate than humanitarian support. The U.S. is an exception: more than 60% of Ukrainian respondents rate its military support as appropriate. Among German students, the number of those who cannot assess this is very high. However, military support from Germany was rated by both Konstanz and Kyiv students as the most inadequate among all countries included in the questionnaire.

As mentioned above, the survey refers to opinions about Ukrainian society. About half of the Konstanz students state that they have no specific information about Ukraine and therefore cannot answer. The other half believe that Ukraine has been very successful in developing democracy (56%), that Ukraine and Russia are brotherly nations (31%), that Ukraine is internally divided into pro- and anti-Russian factions (30%), and that corruption is still widespread in Ukraine (35%). In addition, almost 50% of respondents from Konstanz support Ukrainian membership in the EU.

Among Kyiv students, agreement with statements about common roots with Russia is significantly lower: only 2% support the idea of brotherly nations. However, students from Kyiv are more critical of Ukrainian society, e.g. they agree more often that corruption is widespread in Ukraine (77 %) and that Ukraine is still dominated by a few oligarchs (30 %).

The students interviewed from Germany and Ukraine see completely different approaches to overcoming the current situation. In Ukrainian society, a more radical attitude toward the aggressor and the fight against it is widespread. Accordingly, the answers of the students from Kyiv underline this attitude. The vast majority of Ukrainian students (80%) support the goal of continuing the fight until the complete liberation of the territories occupied by Russia since 2014, while among German students less than a third support this. Slightly more than 50% of the Konstanz students surveyed support the option of an immediate ceasefire. Student opinion on NATO membership and the restoration of Ukraine's 2013 borders is similar among respondents from Kyiv and Konstanz. The majority of students from both countries support NATO membership for Ukraine and the restoration of Ukraine's 2013 borders, although students from Kyiv are more supportive of these proposals.

Our survey of a Ukrainian and a German university in the summer of 2022 sheds light on feelings and attitudes toward the war in Ukraine. It is not surprising that students from Konstanz and Kyiv perceive the situation differently. The respondents from Kyiv have personally experienced the atrocities of the war. This is reflected in their feelings about the danger of a new world war, their own deaths, and concern for the lives of their families and friends. The students from Konstanz are more afraid of a worsening of the economic situation. The students from both countries see Russia as the main cause of the war. However, students from Kyiv are more likely to believe that other international actors, such as EU countries, the U.S. and even Ukraine, are partly responsible for the conflict. While the Konstanz students know less about Ukrainian history and the current situation, the Kyiv students are more critical of Ukraine. As expected, the tendency toward authoritarianism is higher among Ukrainian students than among German students. Probably, this difference is due to both a long-term cultural (post-Soviet) imprint and their own experiences of insecurity in a cruel and violent war.

References

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