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Understandings of democracy and “good citizenship” in Ukraine: utopia for the people, participation in politics not required

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates and compares how people in diverse peripheral regions of Ukraine understood democracy, their role as citizens in a democracy, and the meaning of “good citizenship” in 2021, the year before Russia’s full-scale invasion. We conduct thematic analysis of focus group discussions to demonstrate gaps and inconsistencies in the understandings of democracy articulated by our participants. We find that a utopian understanding of democracy is common, in which authorities are expected to “listen to the people” and keep them satisfied, but the need for government to manage conflicting interests is not recognized. Understandings of good citizenship are inclusive and pro-social, but mostly detached from institutional politics. We observe similarity across regions in how democracy is understood in the abstract. However, the meaning ascribed to democracy often varied when discussion moved from the abstract to particular country examples – a finding relevant beyond the Ukrainian case, for survey-based research on public understandings of democracy more generally.

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Ukraine in 2021 was classified as an electoral democracy (V-Dem Institute 2021), or a transitional, hybrid regime (Freedom House 2021a). Although its recent elections have met basic democratic requirements, Ukraine is not a place where democracy has strong roots. In the post-Soviet period, Ukrainian political leaders have lacked consistent commitment to democratic principles and the rule of law (Way 2005; Ambrosio 2017), while political institutions have suffered from corruption (Åslund 2014). When surveyed, most Ukrainians say that it is important to live in a country that is governed democratically, but in 2020 only a minority believed that their country was being governed that way, and most were dissatisfied with the functioning of the political system (Ukrainian Centre for European Policy 2020).

Conscious of Ukraine’s strategic importance, Western governments have tried to support the development of Ukrainian democracy. Western support has included conditional financial assistance and diplomatic pressure to force the implementation of reforms (Barnes 2015), but it also encompasses programs aimed at consolidating democracy at the grassroots level, via the media, education, and civil society (Mazepus et al. 2021). Policymakers believe that strengthening commitment to democracy among citizens can boost the prospects of democratic consolidation. This view is supported by comparative research indicating that public support for democracy can help democratic regimes survive when some level of democracy exists already (Claassen 2020). It is expected

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that public support for democracy might help to sustain an emerging democratic regime through periods of crisis, for example, by reducing the likelihood of anti-democratic politicians attaining power.

The expected connection between public support for democracy (as expressed in surveys) and democratic consolidation is, however, largely premised on the assumption that citizens possess an orthodox understanding of what democracy means. If this is not the case, they are not likely to recognize when democratic principles are being violated, or hold accountable (through voting or protests) the politicians or parties responsible for such violations. Moreover, if public understandings of democracy are weak or unorthodox, this may empower politicians who profess a commitment to democracy rhetorically, but in fact promote policies that are harmful to democratic consolidation.

Citizen understandings of democracy are therefore substantively important in the context of an unconsolidated democracy like Ukraine. Yet, it is surprisingly rare for them to be studied in qualitative depth. An extensive academic literature uses national and cross-national survey data to explore understandings of democracy in different parts of the world, including Eastern Europe (for example, Ferrín and Kriesi 2016). However, closed-ended survey questions are limited in their ability to shed light on how people understand complex concepts and systems. The response options are necessarily shaped by researcher assumptions. They also tend to be static to allow comparison over time, but this makes them unlikely to fully capture how understandings are shifting. Open-ended survey questions have some advantages when it comes to capturing authentic and fluid understandings, but still result in oversimplification to an extent that is potentially misleading (Schaffer 2014).

This article investigates citizen understandings of democracy in Ukraine using a qualitative approach. The article presents evidence from focus groups that were conducted, online, in February 2021 with participants from three Ukrainian towns: Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi in Odesa Region, Bilopillia in Sumy Region, and Mukachevo in Zakarpattia Region. These towns are located far from Ukraine's political center, within 50 kilometres of the Ukrainian border, but in very different parts of the country. The towns are not representative of Ukraine in any sense, but they were selected to reflect some of Ukraine's considerable regional, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. The article first investigates how understandings of democracy intersect with understandings of "good citizenship" across the three locations. Then, through comparison, the article investigates the extent to which citizens from different parts of Ukraine's periphery converge or diverge in their views of what a democracy should look like, and what part (if any) ordinary citizens should play in making democracy work.

Our analysis finds important inconsistencies and gaps in the understandings of democracy articulated by our participants. We find that understandings of democracy varied depending on whether the discussion focused on democracy as an abstract concept, or democracy in particular countries, including Ukraine. Most participants associated democracy with freedoms. However, the freedoms mentioned included some that are not conventionally considered essential to democracy – such as the freedom afforded by higher incomes and freedom to use a preferred language in education. Many participants held a utopian understanding of democracy, in which the authorities (*vlada/vlast*) were expected listen to the people (*narod*), work for the people's well-being, and keep them satisfied, but the need for government to manage conflicting interests was not recognized. We found that participants' understandings of good citizenship emphasised compliance with rules and norms and contributions to collective well-being, rather than engagement with politics, which was often considered optional or even futile.

Our study makes several contributions, both to the literature on Ukrainian politics, and to the wider field of research into public understandings of democracy globally. In relation to Ukraine, we show that partial and utopian understandings of democracy are shaping public assessments of the country's democratic performance. We also show that norms associated with "good" Ukrainian citizenship appear similar across diverse regions, thus complementing recent research that ascribes a unifying potential to Ukrainian citizenship as a category of identity. In relation to the wider

literature on public understanding(s) of democracy, we highlight shortcomings in the way that “understanding of democracy” has been conceptualized and operationalized previously. We show the need to differentiate between respondents’ ability to *list characteristics associated with democracy* and their ability to *explain democracy’s mechanisms*. We also show the need to account for variation in the meaning that respondents ascribe to democracy when talking about it abstract terms and when talking about country-examples.

Public (mis)understandings of democracy – a review of the literature

Most existing research about public understandings of democracy is based on survey evidence. The World Values Survey (2021), for example, asks respondents to identify the “essential characteristics of democracy” from a list of nine options, ranging from “people choose their leaders in free elections,” to “the state makes people’s incomes equal.” The European Social Survey (Round 6) similarly asked respondents to rate the “importance to democracy” of 16 characteristics, including free and fair elections and protection for minority rights. Other major surveys (such as the regional Barometer surveys in Africa, Asia, and Latin America) have taken an open-ended approach, asking respondents “What does democracy mean to you?” and allowing them to name up to three elements.

Based on such surveys, there is a large literature that compares public knowledge and understandings of democracy across countries and regions (including Carrión 2008; Chu et al. 2008; Ferrín and Kriesi 2016). Survey evidence suggests that most people around the world can offer a meaningful definition of democracy when asked, and that their definitions tend to be “overwhelmingly positive in valence, narrow in scope, and liberal in substance” (Shin 2017, 6). Most Europeans appear to share a view of democracy that involves free and fair elections and the rule of law (Hernández 2016, 53–55). In East Asia, citizens most frequently associate democracy with “freedom and liberty” (Chu et al. 2008, 11). Beyond identifying common themes, researchers have also highlighted variations in the emphasis which citizens place on different aspects of democracy. Europeans vary in the importance they place on social rights, such as protection from poverty, relative to political rights, such as elections (Oser and Hooghe 2018). Across Latin America, public understandings of democracy vary in both complexity (Canache 2012) and substance, with “normative” understandings, based on liberty and equality, contrasted against “instrumental” ones, based on the provision of well-being (Carrión 2008). At the same time, researchers have observed contradictions and inconsistencies in the “understandings” of democracy reported by survey respondents. Shin (2017, 1), for example, concludes that “a vast majority of global citizenries especially in post-authoritarian and authoritarian countries are either uninformed or misinformed about the fundamental characteristics of democracy and its alternatives.” He argues that beyond the long-democratic countries of the West, public understandings of democracy often include autocratic elements, and characteristics considered essential to democracy are frequently not recognized as such.

Where does Ukraine fit within this global picture? Hernández (2016, 63) argues that Europeans have a “broad and far-reaching understanding of democracy,” and that “the word democracy does not hold culturally specific meanings in Europe,” based on results of the 2012 European Social Survey, which included Ukraine. Ukrainians were found to place relatively high importance on “social justice elements” of democracy over “liberal and electoral elements,” but they still considered the rule of law and free and fair elections to be indispensable. The European Social Survey did not, however, include any “wrong answers” (authoritarian characteristics) in the list of options presented to respondents when asking them to identify important elements of democracy, so it did not allow the extent of misunderstandings to be explored.

In the early 1990s, Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger (1997) found that a substantial minority of Ukrainians (29% in 1992) could not give any response when asked the open-ended question “What does democracy mean to you personally?” Among those who did respond, most said that democracy meant “freedom” of one kind or another, with smaller numbers mentioning majority rule

and the rule of law. More than half of the respondents agreed that “participation of people [in politics] is not necessary if decision-making is left in the hands of a few trusted, competent leaders.” Limited public understandings of democracy were similarly apparent in a study by Korosteleva (2004), who found that around one in five Ukrainians surveyed in 2003 could not say what democracy meant to them. Although “provision of freedoms” was a relatively common understanding of democracy, Korosteleva described the diversity of understandings of democracy expressed by Ukrainians as striking: it ranged from “something different from communism,” to “dignified living,” and from “mission impossible” to “the political regime of the USA” (Korosteleva 2004, 131). Ukrainians, she wrote, appeared to welcome elections and a multi-party system, but distrusted all levels of government and were content to delegate decisions to appointed officials. More recently, it seems that public understandings of democracy in Ukraine have received relatively little scholarly attention. There are some indications, though, that perceptions of democracy, like so many other things in Ukraine, vary by region. Erlich and Garner (2020) found that views of democracy in Kyiv were generally more nuanced than elsewhere in the country, while Ukrainians in the west and east disagreed on which of their former presidents – Poroshenko or Yanukovych – should be considered more “democratic.”

A topic that has become salient in the literature on Ukrainian politics since 2014 is civic identity; an identity that is “centred on the more inclusive notion of Ukrainian citizenship,” and contrasted against ethnic identity (Sasse and Lackner 2019, 77). Conceptually, citizenship and democracy are intimately connected: democracy cannot function in even a minimal sense without citizens who vote. Some Ukrainians are reporting increased pride in being citizens of their state since Euromaidan (Kulyk 2016). Barrington (2021) argues that Ukrainian citizenship has become a category that bonds people together across ethnic and linguistic lines. So far, though, this academic research on citizenship in Ukraine has treated citizenship as a category of belonging, without exploring how Ukrainian citizenship is understood by those who claim it as part of their identity. There has been little investigation of how (if at all) Ukrainians’ understandings of citizenship intersect with their understandings of democracy.

Understandings of citizenship have been researched in other parts of the world (Dalton 2008; Hooghe, Oser, and Marien 2016), although the amount of empirical research on this issue has been described as “rather disappointing” (van Deth 2013, 10). Studies tend to focus on the norms of “good citizenship,” and how these vary across place and time. There has been particular interest in assessing whether public understandings of “good citizenship” incorporate the ideal of *active* or engaged citizenship that is believed to benefit democracy. In other words, do people view active participation in democratic politics and civic life as an essential part of being a good citizen? The evidence, mostly from Western democracies, suggests that regular political or civic participation between elections is not, in fact, widely considered central to “good citizenship” (van Deth 2013; Hooghe, Oser, and Marien 2016). Voting is the exception. The cross-national International Civic and Citizenship Education Survey (ICCS) in 2009 found that 82% of adolescent respondents considered “voting in every national election” to be an important aspect of citizenship, while just 43% said the same for “engaging in political discussions” (Hooghe, Oser, and Marien 2016, 120). We are aware of only one nationally representative survey asking Ukrainians how they understand “good citizenship.” It found that Ukrainians associate good citizenship with always obeying rules and laws (84%), and always voting in elections (74%), while active participation in civil society organizations and initiatives was considered important to citizenship by a more modest 57% of respondents (USAID and Pact 2018).

Citizens’ willingness to engage in politics and civic life is often interpreted as an indicator of the health of democracy (Putnam 2000; Dalton 2008). In post-authoritarian countries of Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, relatively low levels of engagement have therefore been viewed as a cause for concern (Lutsevych 2013). Citizens’ reluctance to engage has been attributed to poor governance and high levels of corruption (Hooghe and Quintelier 2014), as well as to mistrust in organized collective action, a legacy from the Communist era (Howard 2003). In post-Communist Ukraine, vast

numbers of active, mobilized citizens have twice managed to oust corrupt political leaders from power; collective action by civil society is credited with helping to protect Ukraine's statehood; and civil society activists became influential reform actors after 2014 (Shapovalova and Burlyuk 2018). Yet despite hopes for a "long-lasting civic awakening" (Puglisi 2015, 7, 20), still only a minority of Ukrainians were reporting regular participation in organized civil society by 2018 (USAID and Pact 2018).

Citizens' perceptions of their own role in democracy are surely an important aspect of how they understand democracy more generally. It therefore makes sense to study public understandings of democracy and public understandings of citizenship together. Moreover, norms of "good citizenship" have been shown to influence levels of political activism (Bolzendahl and Coffé 2013), the kind of activism which – it is hoped – might help to consolidate democracy in Ukraine. Do those who self-identify as Ukrainian citizens hold an understanding of "good citizenship" that is conducive to building participatory democracy? This important question has not been investigated in the literature thus far, so the present study addresses it as part of the wider investigation into understandings of democracy in Ukraine.

Methods and data

Our study is based on nine focus groups that took place online in February 2021. The focus groups were administered for Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy (Odesa Region), Bilopillia (Sumy Region), and Mukachevo (Zakarpattia Region). The locations were selected to allow comparison between diverse regions of Ukraine. Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy lies not far from Moldova in southern Ukraine, an ethnically mixed region where Russian is the most widely used language. Bilopillia lies close to Russia in the northeast, a region that is also predominantly Russian-speaking, with a relatively high proportion of people self-identifying as Russian. Mukachevo is near Hungary in the far west, where Ukrainian is the most widely used language, but there is a large minority of Hungarian-speakers.

Our choice of regions was guided not only by comparative logic, but also by substantive interest in studying how people view democracy and good citizenship in peripheral parts of Ukraine. Ukraine's peripheral regions are sometimes regarded as vulnerable to destabilizing cross-border influences. They are home to ethnic and linguistic minorities who (some fear) might feel less attached to Ukraine than to nation(s) nearby. By focusing on peripheral locations, we hope to speak to debates about Ukraine's security that depict the periphery and its residents as a cause for concern.

After we received ethical approval from the University of Glasgow, we organized the focus groups with help from Ukrainian research company Kantar-TNS. We asked Kantar-TNS to recruit participants to three groups in each region, with six participants per group. Our choice of towns within each region was guided (and limited) by the capacity of Kantar-TNS to arrange recruitment in each place, as the company only conducts research in certain population centers where it has staff. In each town, one group comprised older participants (aged 41–60) whose first language was not Ukrainian (in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy and Bilopillia this meant Russian-speakers, in Mukachevo it meant Hungarian-speakers). Another group in each place consisted of younger participants (aged 18–30) whose first language was not Ukrainian. A third group in each place comprised participants aged 25–45 whose first language was Ukrainian, but who lacked higher education (in the other groups, education levels were mixed). We organized the groups in this way with the expectation that understandings of democracy and good citizenship might vary by age, education level, and language, in order to explore some of that variation. Each group was gender balanced. Of course, the groups are not representative of any wider population, but they do allow insights into how democracy and citizenship are understood among people whose language and level of education might potentially constitute barriers to engagement with the Ukrainian political system. All participants gave informed consent to participation in the project and use of their data, by electronically signing a consent form.

All focus group discussions were led by one professional Ukrainian moderator, based on a protocol prepared by the authors, and lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The moderator was able to switch between Russian and Ukrainian, allowing the participants to express themselves in either of those languages. If a participant spoke up in Ukrainian (or Russian), the moderator would respond to that participant in Ukrainian (or Russian) accordingly. Unfortunately, it was not possible to provide moderation in Hungarian, so the participants with a Hungarian-language background communicated in Ukrainian or Russian, but this did not seem to impede the conversation. In the six groups where Ukrainian was not the participants' first language, most participants spoke Russian most (but not all) of the time. In the other three groups, where the participants had declared Ukrainian as their first language, there was switching between languages, as some participants spoke Ukrainian consistently and others spoke some Russian or *surzhyk* (a mix of the two).

The discussions were transcribed by Kantar-TNS, and we analyze the transcripts here using inductive thematic analysis – applying codes that describe ideas expressed by the participants, then identifying broader themes on the basis of the codes (Braun and Clarke 2019). Both authors worked simultaneously on the coding, using the cloud-based version of Atlas.ti V9. The “Reports” function within Atlas.ti facilitated comparison of themes across different groups. Quotations in this article have been translated into English by the authors and attributed using anonymous participant codes in the format Px-FGDx-M/F (participant number–focus group discussion number–male/female). We note the original language (Ukrainian, Russian, or *surzhyk*) after each code.

Our analytical approach is emic, in that we are primarily interested in documenting the meanings attached to democracy and good citizenship by our participants; we are not testing whether their understandings match any definitions of these concepts that we consider “correct.” That said, we do highlight areas in which the understandings articulated by our participants diverge from models of democracy commonly adopted by political scientists.

Our analysis is also conducted within a social constructionist epistemological framework; in other words, we are interested in how meanings are produced collectively through social interaction (Wilkinson 2014). Our aim is not to elicit the pre-existing opinions of separate individuals, but rather, to observe how shared meanings are constructed as participants build upon and sometimes question each other's knowledge and experiences. In every focus group, participants tended to build upon the ideas of democracy and citizenship that had already been voiced by others. The resulting discussion is therefore a more fully articulated account of how the participants understood democracy and citizenship than would have been obtained from individual interviews. We recognize that our participants, at times, expressed themselves using phrases from established and widely shared social narratives (“scripts”) about Ukrainian politics. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to explore how the meanings constructed during our focus groups intersect with social narratives in Ukrainian media and public discourse.

The decision to conduct the focus groups online, rather than in person, was taken to ensure participant safety in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is hard to say whether or how the participants' contributions were affected by the online format (our impression was that group dynamics were similar to groups that were administered offline). Perhaps most importantly, we could only recruit participants with internet access. Our findings therefore do not capture the views of Ukrainians without the internet – up to 30% of the population, according to Freedom House (2021b), – and this is an inevitable limitation of the research.

Understandings of democracy

One advantage of focus groups is that the meaning ascribed to concepts such as democracy can be explored via both direct questioning (“what is democracy?”) and less direct routes, as participants respond to each other and to follow-up questions. This provides evidence (missing from survey-based research) of the reasoning that underlies their understanding, as well as inconsistencies that emerge as participants think about democracy in different contexts. Our protocol began with a direct question:

“How do you understand the word democracy?” This was followed by questions asking which countries participants thought of as democracies, whether they considered Ukraine to be a democracy (why, why not), and what responsibilities (if any) they ascribed to political leaders, mass media, and ordinary citizens in a democracy. The analysis in this section is based mainly on responses generated by those questions. The full protocol of questions is available from the authors upon request.

We identify six themes in our participants’ understandings of democracy: (1) freedoms; (2) a people-led system; (3) provision and protection; (4) a good economy; (5) law, order, and justice; and (6) elections and institutions. The first two themes were the most prevalent in responses to the direct question of what democracy means.

The majority of participants in all nine focus groups mentioned *freedoms* as a central component of democracy. Some referred to freedom in general terms, like this middle-aged man from Bilopillia:

[Democracy] is freedom of thinking, freedom of action. Freedom of everything that a person does. Freedom. (P2-FGD4-M, Russian)

Many responses, however, emphasized freedom of speech and expression. For example, a 42-year-old man in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy commented:

Democracy is, roughly speaking, freedom of speech. That we are equal among each other, that we can say and think and communicate our viewpoints freely, as we see things. (P2-FGD3-M, Russian)

Frequent references to “free speech,” “free expression of oneself,” and “freedom of action” that occurred in all the focus groups suggest that democracy as an abstract concept is predominantly associated with freedoms.

The second prominent theme in the participants’ understanding of democracy concerns its *people-led* nature. Some participants alluded to semantics of democracy, pointing to the people as a source of power. Others argued that democracy should rest on the people’s will. A 44-year-old man from Mukachevo said that democratic governance is better than other options precisely because it is driven by the people:

Democracy is first of all when people’s views are taken into consideration. And this way policies are developed. I think that’s democracy. (P5-FGD9-M, Ukrainian)

Most references to people power or a people-led system were somewhat simplistic. For instance, a 30-year-old woman from Mukachevo said:

[Democracy is] when people rule the power. People have their own opinion, which is listened to. What people want—the authorities execute. (P1-FGD9-F, Ukrainian)

By and large, participants did not elaborate on the mechanisms of people power, apart from elections – and, occasionally, protests. For example, a male participant in Bilopillia explained democracy as:

the power of the people, when people decide whether or not they want to live this way in the state. If the authorities take some wrong decisions, against the people, the people rise up. For each other. And then the authorities draw conclusions that they were wrong and take some decisions. (P2-FGD6-M, Ukrainian)

The *people-led system* theme was quite broadly represented (in eight out of nine focus groups), and it often arose during discussion of the responsibilities of democratic leaders. Participants in different focus groups said that democratic leaders should, first and foremost, “listen to people.” Other leader responsibilities related to this theme included “keeping promises,” “serving people,” and “caring for people.” The theme of a people-led system was also observed in discussions of democratic country-examples and the Ukrainian context. In particular, many participants complained about distance between Ukraine’s political establishment and the common people. One male participant from Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy commented bitterly:

So what, if we have freedom of speech? We can say some things, but no one hears us. We want to do something, but no one even helps us in any way. (P3-FGD3-M, Russian)

Complaints about Ukrainian realities, in which “people are not heard,” were often connected to complaints that “people are not cared for.” In fact, the distinctions between the two notions sometimes seemed blurred. Illustrative in this respect is a comment by a 29-year-old woman from Bilopillia, in which she explained her choice of Denmark as an example of democracy:

They listen to the people there, they do more for the people. My sister has been in Denmark recently and she has had very positive emotions. Everything is for the people there. (P1-FGD6-F, Russian)

While she mentions that “they listen to the people there,” her further elaboration reveals a quest for care. Similar reasoning was communicated by other participants who tried to substantiate their claims of foreign countries being democratic or Ukraine lacking democracy with arguments about care. Responses suggest that for a number of participants “being heard” implies “being cared for.”

Hence, there is some overlap between the *people-led system* theme and the *provision and protection* theme. References within the latter theme were also quite widespread in response to the direct question about the meaning of democracy and in participants’ discussion of (non-) democratic country-examples. For example, a 40-year-old man from Bilopillia argued that Ukraine is not a democracy due to its lack of social protection:

What kind of democracy is there in Ukraine? ... No one worries about people. It would be good to have free medical treatment, education. To have everything free. And what do we have here? Insurance? There is nothing for people. (P4-FGD6-M, Ukrainian)

Participants from other focus groups also mentioned social protection and provision of opportunities by the state as markers of democracy. In particular, there were recurring references to “support of the state,” “opportunities to learn and develop,” and “job opportunities” as essential attributes of democratic countries. Notably, the *protection* theme was invoked by participants who mentioned countries such as the United Arab Emirates and the Philippines as examples of democracies. Thus, a 53-year-old woman from Bilopillia said that the Philippines were democratic because:

There is protection, there is freedom of choice, there is care about people. (P5-FGD4-F, Russian)

Another identified theme – *good economy* – partially overlapped with the theme of *provision and protection* due to the perceived link between a developed economy and the welfare of citizens. The *good economy* theme comprised references to a more proactive (less protected) citizenry, but some references did imply that a good economy could somehow be provided. In this regard, the issue of job opportunities was prominent, and notions such as prosperity, development, and high living standards were often mentioned.

The two remaining identified themes were *elections and institutions* and *law, order, justice*. The former theme had links to the *people-led system* theme, and contained references to elections as a mechanism by which democracy functions. The theme was observed in seven of the nine focus groups, but it was the least represented in terms of the number of references. The *law, order, justice* theme comprised references to equality before law, compliance with laws, and the need for order. The following quotations are illustrative:

Democracy is law. One law for all. That’s the principle democracy rests upon. I think it’s right. (P1-FGD4-M, Russian)

Democracy in my understanding is to abide by all norms and laws that exist in society and state (P2-FGD7-M, Russian)

Overall, analysis of the focus group discussions shows that democracy is associated predominantly with positive features – freedoms, rule of law, and a decent life – which many participants saw as lacking in Ukraine. One person said she was not a supporter of democracy and several others

expressed ambivalent views, but the vast majority of participants wanted democracy for Ukraine. At the same time, understandings of democracy were characterized by vague statements and a lack of elaboration about democratic institutions, procedures, and limitations.

Understandings of good citizenship and the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy

To generate discussion about the meaning and norms of citizenship, we began by asking participants whether they thought ordinary citizens had any responsibilities *in a democracy*. They were then asked directly, “What does it mean to be a good citizen of Ukraine?” Participants were invited to describe individuals known to them who could be described as “good Ukrainian citizens,” and to reflect on whether they considered *themselves* to be good citizens. Follow-up questions probed whether people from any ethnic and linguistic background could be considered good Ukrainian citizens, whether good citizens should take an interest in politics, and what the participants could remember learning about citizenship in school or other social contexts.

When asked about the responsibilities of citizens *in a democracy*, participants gave a narrow range of responses that can be summarized under two themes: *compliance* (with existing laws, rules and social norms) and *engagement* (with society and/or the state). It should be noted that we did not explicitly ask the participants to differentiate citizen responsibilities in a democracy from citizen responsibilities in other political contexts. Most of the responsibilities that participants mentioned under the two identified themes reflected values and behaviors that might be encouraged within democratic and non-democratic systems alike.

The theme of compliance was dominant, occurring in all nine focus groups. It encompassed numerous references to “abiding by the law,” as well as references to the norms of considerate, pro-social behavior. For example, a 29-year-old woman from Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy commented:

Tidy up after your dog. Don't be noisy at 12 midnight. Don't create trouble for others, start with yourself, teach your child. Respect everything around you, not only the people . . . I believe that democracy starts from this. (P3-FGD2-F, Russian)

The idea that democracy (as the participants understood it) could grow from small acts of compliance with laws and norms by “responsible” citizens can similarly be observed in the following quotation. Asked about the duties of citizens in a democracy, a woman in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy stated:

If there is some rubbish, pick it up! It doesn't matter whether it was your rubbish or not. It starts from the smallest things . . . I believe people should learn to tidy up after themselves, not only those who live in private homes and not only those who live in apartments and on their own little piece of land. In other words, get together with other people and make such small-small steps towards—simply, firstly, so that there will be contact between people and there won't be arguments. If there are no arguments, of course, it will be much easier to live. (P1-FGD3-F, Russian)

The theme of *engagement* in relation to citizens' democratic responsibilities occurred in eight of the nine groups, but was less prominent than the theme of compliance. The engagement theme included some references to voting in elections (mentioned in four of the nine focus groups), alongside references to expressing one's opinions, “helping the authorities,” and “showing initiative.” For example, a woman in the younger Bilopilnia group said that, in order for democracy to work, ordinary citizens should:

In all ways demonstrate initiative and their citizen's position. Because, well, if we hope that someone else will do it if I don't—then we, our democratism [sic], will get lost somewhere. (P5-FGD5-F, Russian)

The participants were generally vague, though, about what kinds of engagement and citizen initiatives were possible or desirable in a democratic context. No one mentioned the possibility of getting involved in political parties, local committees, or campaigning. Citizen responsibilities were

discussed primarily as actions to be taken outside the realm of representative, institutional politics. The notion that citizens might be responsible for holding their elected representatives accountable featured very little in the discussion, beyond a comment that citizens should not cast their vote “in exchange for buckwheat” (gifts of buckwheat have notoriously been used to bribe poorer voters at Ukrainian elections in the past).

The discussion next turned to the meaning of “good citizenship” in the Ukrainian context, without explicit reference to democracy. When asked “What does it mean to be a good citizen of Ukraine?” participants continued to focus on compliance with rules and norms in the first instance, and generally concurred that good citizens should pay their taxes, “keep order,” and avoid breaking the law. Four additional themes (somewhat overlapping) can be identified in the participants’ understandings of good citizenship: first, *personal virtues*, second, *contributions to collective well-being*, third, *patriotism*, and finally *reluctance to include political or ethno-linguistic elements among expectations of a good citizen*. Again, it is worth noting that these themes reflect values and behaviors that are not specific to *democratic* citizenship. Similar values could be associated with citizenship in other types of political system (Distelhorst and Fu 2019).

The theme of personal virtues was prominent in understandings of good citizenship across the focus groups. The virtues that participants expected from good citizens included responsibility (“thinking before acting”), living in a moral way (“not drinking, not smoking,” “keeping God’s commandments”), helping others, educating oneself, working hard, and cleanliness. Cleanliness or tidiness was emphasized at length by participants in multiple groups. For example, one woman in Bilopilnia complained:

Nobody takes care of anything. It’s not like that in normal countries. It doesn’t happen that they [in “normal” countries] drop sweet wrappers. We should explain to our children from a young age that it’s wrong to drop [litter], there are bins for that . . . I believe that in order to have a normal country we must start from ourselves—don’t break things, breaking is not building. And value what we have. When we start to value, our life will be different. In other countries there are fines for that. It is unclear what we have. I think, yes, democracy . . . (P1-FGD6-F, Russian)

In the above quotation, we can see that the participant does not start with a clearly articulated understanding of citizenship linked to democracy in the abstract. Rather, she starts from an impression that Ukraine differs from what she calls “normal” countries (the Russian word *normal’nyi* used here has the connotation of decent or civilized, in addition to typical). One difference, in her view, is that people in Ukraine drop litter and get away with it – a problem that she attributes to shortcomings in Ukrainian law/enforcement (“in other countries there are fines for that”), as well as civic culture (“nobody takes care of anything – it’s not like that in normal countries”). When the word democracy is mentioned at the end of this comment, it is not within a full sentence, but appears connected to the participant’s utopian vision of a “normal” (decent, civilized) country, which Ukraine has yet to become.

The theme of good citizens making *contributions to collective well-being* overlaps substantially with the personal virtues theme, and was similarly widespread, being observable in all nine focus groups. This theme included references to helping others (neighbors, the elderly), raising children well, planting trees, achieving success for the state in sports or science, studying or working hard (“to bring income not only to myself, but to the state”), and further references to keeping communal spaces tidy and in good repair. Several participants voiced ideas on this theme that have roots in the Soviet era. For example, one 55-year-old man in Mukachevo recalled practices of good citizenship from the past:

Well, how did it use to be? We used to collect scrap metal. What for? So that production would develop, and so on. Scrap paper, so that books would be published. And so on and so forth. (P2-FGD7-M, Russian)

A younger, female participant (P1-FGD5-F, Russian) cited the mayor of Poltava as an example of a good citizen, because he organized “various interesting *subbotniki*” to improve the town; *subbotnik* is a Soviet-era term referring to a day of unpaid labor that demonstrated solidarity.

The theme of *patriotism* captures references to positivity about Ukraine and achievements for Ukraine, which a few participants associated with good citizenship. This theme was not widespread, occurring briefly in five of the focus groups. The handful of comments associated with this theme included the assertion that a good citizen should “respect their country and help it back to its feet, let’s say, if it has fallen down” (P1-FGD3-F, Russian). But it also connected to disillusionment, as a couple of participants complained of their inability to feel pride in their country as a good citizen should (“we have nothing to feel proud about,” P4-FGD4-F, Russian).

The final theme we identify from the discussions of citizenship is a widespread *reluctance to include political or ethno-linguistic elements among expectations of a good citizen*. When asked directly whether a good citizen should take an interest in political developments, the majority of participants indicated that this was optional, or dependent on individual circumstances, rather than expected from everyone, or that a superficial interest was sufficient. The following quotations are illustrative:

I believe that ordinary people, everyone can choose, we have freedom of choice. For some it’s interesting, for others it’s not. For example, I am not very interested in watching news about politics, because there is too much filth there. (P1-FGD5-F, Russian)

How can you force a person to follow all of those news events, if it’s as we said earlier—whoever pays, that’s who they show news about. What’s the point of watching? (P5-FGD2-M, Russian)

Of course, it’s necessary [to follow the news and politics], at least superficially. (P3-FGD5-F, Russian)

Politics is for politicians. We can support, one way or another, but the people do not have to engage in politics. (P5-FGD9-M, Ukrainian)

When asked directly whether language and ethnic background were relevant to good citizenship in Ukraine, none of the participants supported this proposition. A participant in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy commented that a good citizen could “even speak Chinese if the person labors for this county, does something, makes an effort” (P4-FGD2-M, Russian); another in Mukachevo said that “here we have Slavs, and Romanians, and Slovaks, and Germans, and Russians, and Ukrainians, and we all live in Ukraine. Why not? The main thing is that the person is good!” (P1-FGD7-F, Russian).

Summarizing, our analysis suggests a dominant understanding of good citizenship that is inclusive and pro-social, but largely detached from institutional politics. The participants associated both democracy and good citizenship with a smoothly functioning society. However, most did not seem to regard their own regular engagement with politics as integral to either concept.

Comparison across regions, groups, and discursive contexts

All the identified themes in our participants’ understandings of democracy were present, at least to some degree, in all three regions under study. Our analysis did not indicate any major consistent differences between the groups in Odesa Region, Sumy Region, and Zakarpattia Region in what democracy was understood to mean in an abstract sense.

Some important regional differences did, however, emerge in how the abstract concept of democracy was applied when discussing real world political contexts. Most notably, only the participants in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy (Odesa Region) for whom Ukrainian was not their first language mentioned the Ukrainianization of education and the recent ban on certain Ukrainian TV channels (channels linked to pro-Russian politicians) as infringements of democracy. Participants complained about these issues when explaining why they thought Ukraine was not a democracy:

Education and—Why should my children speak [Ukrainian]? We are Russian-speakers here, and they are being forced to Ukrainian, there’s no choice. They’ve taken Russian away, for some reason. Why? (P6-FGD1-M, Russian)

Thus, democracy meant freedoms and choices to almost all participants – but not necessarily the same freedoms and choices.

Our participants in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiyi were generally more inclined than those in Bilopillia and Mukachevo to insist that Ukraine was “not a democracy.” A few participants in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiyi said that Ukraine was *partially* democratic, but most would not even go that far, and none said that Ukraine was a democracy. When asked to explain these assessments, the Bilhorod participants cited not only Ukraine’s language and media policies, but also the authorities’ failure to “listen to the people.” In contrast, several participants in Bilopillia and Mukachevo, when asked to give examples of democratic countries, named Ukraine as the first place that came to mind, citing its freedoms and elections as evidence.

The Bilopillia and Mukachevo participants who considered Ukraine to be a democracy were, however, exclusively in the younger focus groups, aged 18–30 (FGD5 and FGD8). The general optimism about Ukrainian democracy in those two groups stood in contrast to more negative views expressed in the older groups, as well as in all the mixed-age groups without higher education. In the latter groups (FGD3, FGD6, FGD9), the themes of democracy meaning provision and protection or a good economy were relatively common, and participants tended to cite lack of jobs and social protection as evidence that Ukraine was only partially or not at all democratic. For example, one participant in Mukachevo argued:

If there were democracy [in Ukraine], they would listen to the people, and incomes would be higher, wages would be higher. Because the people need more than what the government now sets as the minimum . . . It means they are not listening to the opinion of the people. (P1-FGD9-F, Ukrainian)

Another participant in Bilopillia similarly complained:

I’m disabled, I receive 2,000 [hryvnia per month, about £52, as disability benefit]. I’m partially sighted. I got a job. I can’t live on 2,000. I can’t live without a job, either. I won’t live without money. Help from the government? Minimum 2,000 . . . What kind of democracy is that? I don’t have a choice. (P6-FGD6-M, surzhyk)

This quotation, with its reference to lack of choice, fits the theme of democracy meaning freedoms that was observed across all groups. But the emphasis on low incomes or poor employment opportunities constituting a restriction of freedom – and therefore a restriction of democracy – was concentrated particularly in the lower-education groups.

Western countries (the USA, Canada, Germany, the UK, Switzerland, and many others) were named as democracies by multiple participants across all nine groups. Such cross-regional consistency about the democratic nature of Western states might be considered surprising, given the well-known regional cleavages in Ukrainian public opinion on foreign policy issues. The only group that showed some evidence of scepticism about democracy in the West (echoing Russian narratives) was the older, Russian-speaking group in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiyi (FGD1). This was the only group in which the USA was *not* mentioned as an example of democracy. Moreover, one participant in this group said that no country was democratic, another said that democracy in poor countries led to endless protests, and another said that democracy could be harmful. However, even within this most sceptical group, the UK, Germany, and Switzerland were held up as democratic examples (for the record, Russia was not mentioned as an example of democracy in this group or any other).

Having identified some variation among *groups* in how the concept of democracy was applied, we should also note that many *individual participants* were not entirely consistent in their application of the term. In other words, several participants explained the abstract concept of democracy using one set of criteria, but then used a different set of criteria to explain why a particular country was or was not democratic. For example, a participant in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiyi defined democracy as “freedom of action on the condition that it does not obstruct others” – but then said that the UK was democratic by virtue of the “well-being of its people” as well as the supremacy of the law (P2-FGD1-M, Russian). Another participant was not able to explain the meaning of democracy – but confidently stated that Ukraine was not a democracy, whereas America and Germany were so (P4-FGD3-M, Russian). In Bilopillia, one participant said initially that democracy meant “free speech,” but that Germany was a democracy “because they respect everything there, not like here, they don’t

drop litter, it's much better" (P5-FGD6-F, Ukrainian). In Mukachevo, a participant said initially that democracy meant "the keeping of law and order," but evidence of Germany's democracy could be seen in the fact that:

People behave calmly and dress however they like, with whatever hairstyles they like and so on. A haircut if I like, dishevelled locks if I like, a skinhead if I like. People behave freely in [German] society and they feel OK. (P4-FGD7 -M, surzhyk)

In short, there was plentiful evidence that participants held multiple and sometimes contradictory understandings of democracy – some of which were orthodox or correct from a political scientist's perspective, while others were idiosyncratic. Varying understandings of democracy emerged, depending on whether the discussion was focused on abstract principles or concrete examples.

As for understandings of good citizenship and the democratic role of citizens, our analysis again uncovered no clear and consistent thematic differences between the three regions under study. The major themes identified in the previous section were present in Mukachevo, Bilopillia, and Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiyi alike. Thus, participants in all locations associated the role of citizens in a democracy primarily with compliance, and with engagement to a lesser extent. All nine groups highlighted contributions to collective well-being as part of good citizenship, while being reluctant to include political or ethno-linguistic elements among expectations of a good citizen. All but one group mentioned personal virtues in relation to good citizenship. References to patriotism as part of good citizenship came from a minority of participants in five of the nine groups – but were not concentrated in any one region or demographic group.

The groups differed less in their abstract understanding of good citizenship than in the views they expressed about Ukraine when discussing good citizenship. In the younger groups (FGD5, FGD8) the idea of patriotism as part of good citizenship was discussed without any cynicism. For example, one younger participant in Bilopillia asserted: "I'm a good citizen. I'm a patriot" (P6-FGD5-F, Russian). However, in two of the older groups (FGD1 and FGD4) brief references to patriotism went hand-in-hand with negativity about Ukraine, with one older participant in Bilopillia saying: "to be [a] good [citizen], you need to be proud of your country. But we have nothing to be proud of at the moment" (P4-FGD4-F, Russian).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Ukraine's language policy did feature in one group's discussion of good citizenship, despite the general reluctance of all our participants to associate good citizenship with ethno-linguistic characteristics. A participant in the younger Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiyi group commented:

I speak in Russian a bit. That means I'm a little bit bad [as a citizen]. Well, that's what they think among the higher-ups. (P4-FGD2-M, Russian)

This remark reflects the participant's perception that Ukraine's current leadership expects good citizens to speak Ukrainian rather than Russian – although neither the participant himself nor any other participants in our study supported this view.

Conclusions

This article set out to investigate how people in peripheral regions of Ukraine understand democracy and good citizenship. Our analysis of focus group discussions has shown that participants in all three studied regions associated democracy primarily with freedoms, particularly when discussing democracy in the abstract. Many participants referred to freedoms conventionally associated with democracy – particularly freedom of speech. But others referred to the freedom afforded by higher incomes, idiosyncratic freedoms (one participant even mentioned free access to beaches), or freedoms that are salient within the Ukrainian context (freedom to use a preferred language in education). Some participants associated democracy with elections and the right to choose political representatives. However, this was less prominent than the theme of democracy as a people-led

system in a looser sense. This latter theme captured a utopian understanding of democracy, in which the authorities listen to the people, work for the people's well-being, and keep them satisfied, with harmonious decision-making, and apparently little need to reconcile or choose between conflicting interests and priorities. The theme of law, order, and justice was prominent in the participants' understandings of democracy. This theme partially corresponded to orthodox definitions of democracy (with references to equality before the law), but partially diverged (with emphasis on the inclination of ordinary citizens to obey the law, a criterion on which many participants saw Ukraine as falling short of democracy, as they understood it). Many of the participants associated democracy with a strong economy and social protections. Some thought these were necessary for democracy to work, while others viewed them as evidence that leaders were "hearing" their citizens.

Our study focused particularly on how participants understood the role of citizens within a democracy. The need for citizen engagement in a democracy was recognized by most focus groups, but relatively few participants spoke about conventionally recognized forms of *political* engagement. Voting and protests were mentioned occasionally, but the responsibility to engage was more often discussed in looser terms, such as "not being indifferent" or helping the authorities and reporting problems. The participants' understandings of "good citizenship" emphasized compliance with norms and laws, and contributions to collective well-being. Participants often expressed reluctance to associate good citizenship with political interest and engagement; good citizens were expected to show concern for developments in Ukraine, but interest in politics was generally considered optional, or even futile.

Why should we be concerned with the complex and sometimes inconsistent nature of people's understandings of democracy and citizenship, whether in Ukraine, or elsewhere? First, we believe that such complexities and inconsistencies deserve more attention from researchers who study the relationship between public understanding and/or support for democracy and democratic consolidation. There is a theoretical expectation that higher levels of public support for democracy, "correctly" understood, will boost the survival chances of a nascent democratic regime. When investigating that expected relationship, researchers could adopt a more nuanced conceptualization of "understanding democracy" than the list-of-associated-characteristics approach that is currently dominant in political science. In particular, it would be worth conceptually differentiating the ability to *associate democracy with particular characteristics* from the ability to *explain democracy's mechanisms*, i.e. how different actors and institutions within a democratic system are expected to interact. Our research in Ukraine indicates that individuals may name several "correct" defining characteristics of democracy in the abstract when invited to do so, while simultaneously expressing little understanding of how ordinary citizens like themselves can contribute to democracy's functioning. A more nuanced approach to conceptualizing "understanding(s) of democracy" might also differentiate understandings that are expressed in response to a direct question, posed in the abstract, from understandings that are expressed indirectly in the course of talking about specific countries. Our research in Ukraine indicates that consistency of understanding across these different discursive contexts cannot be assumed.

There are reasons to expect that citizens' understanding of their own role within the democratic system might be particularly important for democratic consolidation. You could compare understandings of democracy to understandings of a bicycle: people may understand that a bicycle (democracy) differs from a wheelbarrow (autocracy), and list components that make it different, such as the seat and the handlebars (free elections and equality before the law). But such people still cannot cycle unless they understand that pedaling powers motion, how to steer the bicycle in the desired direction, and how to apply the brakes. In a similar way, can citizens in an unconsolidated democracy logically be expected to help keep democratic consolidation on track if their understanding of democracy includes some knowledge of defining characteristics, but excludes knowledge of the system's mechanics? Our research here cannot explore the relationship between democratic consolidation and these different aspects of "understanding democracy"; we can only propose it as an avenue for further investigation.

Our research also illustrates why people who lack awareness of their role as citizens within a democracy might struggle to distinguish democracy from other – illiberal and autocratic – political regimes. Many of our participants described democracy as a “people-led” system where the authorities “listen to the people.” Provision of care and responsiveness to public demands were understood as evidence that the people were indeed “leading” and authorities “listening.” These understandings are loosely compatible with orthodox definitions of democracy. However, discourses of care and responsive political leadership are projected by some authoritarian governments (Tsai 2007). Citizens who loosely understand democracy as “people-led” and “caring” seem likely to accept such authoritarian governments as “democratic,” if they do not appreciate *how* citizens’ views are supposed to feed into democratic decision-making, via representation and institutions. Of course, democratic representation and institutions in Ukraine do not currently work as well as they should. Our participants’ vague understanding in this area, and their lack of enthusiasm for engaging with institutional politics, reflect the weakness of Ukraine’s democratic infrastructure.

This study offers insights that may already be useful to practitioners (governments, international bodies, civil society groups) that work on grassroots democracy promotion in Ukraine. *If* our focus groups reflect broader trends across Ukraine, the *idea* of democracy is already popular, and Ukrainians already perceive democratic countries in the West as models to emulate. However, understandings of democracy are sometimes more utopian than realistic: many of our participants expected politicians to “listen to the people,” without acknowledging the existence of conflicting interests and priorities among the people, and without appreciating how such conflicting interests and priorities need to be managed via interaction between democratic institutions, political representatives, and politically active citizens. All this would suggest that promoting the general appeal of “Western-style” democracy in Ukraine is a less pressing task than communicating a deeper understanding of how democracy works, and even democracy’s limitations, to avoid the problem of unrealistic expectations leading to disappointment and disillusionment. We must again recognize, of course, that our focus group participants are *not* representative of the Ukrainian population, so different understandings of democracy and good citizenship will exist beyond the three locations in which we worked. However, it seems quite likely that the utopian understandings of democracy highlighted here do exist beyond our studied groups and regions, to an extent that we cannot assess.

Our study contributes to the scholarly literature on Ukrainian politics in a number of ways. First, it suggests that partial, patchy understandings of democracy among the Ukrainian public remained an issue in 2021, adding to earlier studies with similar findings (Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1997; Korosteleva 2004). Second, our work broadens the scope of research about Ukrainian citizenship by examining the norms associated with citizenship; this complements research that ascribes unifying potential to Ukrainian citizenship as a category of identity. Our limited cross-regional comparison indicates that diverse regions along Ukraine’s periphery do share quite similar understandings of what it means to be a good Ukrainian citizen, and their norms are inclusive with respect to language and ethnicity. Third, our study adds to knowledge of public opinion in border regions of Ukraine, where public opinion is sometimes viewed as a security liability due to its perceived vulnerability to subversive, illiberal external influence. Our findings suggest that Western democracies are perceived as positive models in these regions, even among groups for whom educational level and language preferences might constitute obstacles to engagement with the Ukrainian political system. We found evidence of dissatisfaction with Ukrainian democracy in these regions, particularly among the older and less educated groups – but this dissatisfaction, we argue, should be interpreted in light of the participants’ often utopian understanding of what democracy means.

Postscript

This article was completed in 2021, before the Russian Federation launched its full-scale invasion and war on Ukraine in February 2022. The war has affected every aspect of life in Ukraine. It is highly likely to have affected Ukrainian understandings of democracy and good citizenship in ways that we cannot yet establish. We must therefore acknowledge that the empirical findings of this article pertain to a period of Ukrainian political life that has passed. Moreover, the practical questions addressed above about how to strengthen participatory democracy in Ukraine are currently less salient than questions about how to defend Ukraine physically against aggressive Russian imperialism. However, we believe that the understandings documented in this article have not lost their significance. Our focus group discussions shed some light on the context of meanings in which Ukrainians are joining the fight to defend their right to hold Ukrainian citizenship (against the threat of enforced Russification), and to live in a country that holds meaningful elections (unlike autocratic Russia). It is noteworthy that ideals of democracy and Ukrainian citizenship held value for participants across all regions and irrespective of language preferences, despite apparent Russian expectations that people in parts of Ukraine would willingly sacrifice these things to embrace the so-called “Russian world.”

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