

Can Conflict Break Bonds within Society? Exploring the Impact of the Ongoing War on Social Trust in Ukraine

Tamilina, Larysa

Kyiv School of Economics

15 April 2025

Online at https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/124499/ MPRA Paper No. 124499, posted 01 May 2025 01:22 UTC

Can Conflict Break Bonds within Society? Exploring the Impact of the Ongoing War on Social Trust in Ukraine

Larysa Tamilina

Associate Professor

Kyiv School of Economics

Mykoly Spaka st. 3,

Kyiv 03113 Ukraine

Phone: +38 050 7897267

Email: ltamilina@kse.org.ua

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to <u>ltamilina@kse.org.ua</u>.

Can Conflict Break Bonds within Society? Exploring the Impact of the Ongoing War on Social Trust in Ukraine

Larysa Tamilina

Abstract: This study examines the effects of the ongoing war on social trust within Ukrainian society. The key finding suggests that the conflict contributes to a decline in trust, primarily due to its various adverse impacts on individuals. Additionally, the war appears to undermine contextual resources essential for trust-building, thereby indirectly contributing to the erosion of social trust.

Keywords: Social trust, War, Conflict, SEM, Ukraine.

Literature review

The ongoing war with Russia is undeniably affecting all segments of Ukrainian society. Beyond its individual consequences, war also has the potential to reshape collective cooperative behaviour by influencing trust among the population (Rohner et al., 2013). Social trust—commonly defined as the belief that others will act reliably and keep their commitments—is assumed to be shaped by the perceived risks inherent in trusting relationships (Dohmen et al., 2012; Molm, et al., 2000). Armed conflict can substantially alter these risk perceptions, thereby changing the overall level of trust within society (Fiedler, 2023).

A substantial body of research suggests that the influence of conflict on social trust tends to be primarily negative (Cassar et al., 2013). Trust, in particular, appears to decline significantly in regions directly affected by violence (Lewis & Topal, 2023). As such, individuals who identify

as victims of war frequently report lower levels of social trust. In contrast, other studies highlight a potential positive association between conflict and trust (Bellows & Miguel, 2009; Hall & Werner, 2022). Their findings suggest that individuals who have been more heavily exposed to violence or victimization during war may demonstrate increased prosocial behaviour compared to those with lower exposure (Gillian et al., 2014).

To reconcile these contradictory findings, several studies distinguish between in-group and outgroup trust, suggesting that conflict may enhance trust within in-groups while diminishing trust toward out-groups (see Fiedler (2023) for a comprehensive literature review). Trust in individuals from one's own community often remains stable or even increases during conflict, whereas trust toward those outside the community tends to decline and may remain low even after the conflict ends.

This research investigates the impact of war on trust in others by examining the specific case of Ukraine. As a post-communist society, Ukraine has traditionally exhibited moderate levels of interpersonal trust. The question is whether the ongoing war could further reduce individuals' trust, and if so, through what mechanisms this effect occurs.

Data and method description

The analysis draws on original survey data collected by <u>Research.ua LLC</u> in November 2024. The sample consists of 850 respondents aged 16 to 55, with the age boundaries reflecting the specific focus of a broader research project from which this dataset is derived. A detailed description of the survey methodology is available <u>here</u>. The study uses Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to examine the relationships of interest. SEM is particularly well-suited for this analysis as it enables the estimation of latent variables, including war, which cannot be captured by a single, definitive measure but must instead be represented through various items. Furthermore, SEM enables the estimation of both direct and indirect effects among multiple constructs, making it possible to assess the complex pathways through which conflict may influence trust formation (Bauer & Curran, 2019).

In this research, the response variable is social trust (*STr*), measured through a conventual question asking respondents to specify whether one can trust strangers or one should be careful in dealing with them. The response scale varies from 1 to 7, with higher values reflecting greater trust in others.

In constructing the model, trust formation is conceptualized using the conventional two-level framework viewing trust as a result of both individual and contextual resources available within a society. Individual-level resources refer to factors under the direct possession or control of individuals that may influence their willingness to take risks. For example, education is associated with greater trust, as more educated individuals are often more inclined toward risk-taking (Delhey & Newton, 2003). Similarly, individuals with greater financial resources are generally more trusting, as their material security reduces the perceived cost of potential trust violations (Bjornskov, 2005).

Based on this theoretical rationale, the individual component of trust is measured using respondents' education level (*Edc*, coded from 1 "Incomplete secondary education" to 7 "PhD degree or similar"), household monthly income (*Inc*, coded from 1 "Less than 5000 hryvnias"

to 5 "More than 50 000 hryvnias", and overall financial situation (*Wlt*, coded from 1 "There is not enough money even for food" to 6 ""Our family can easily buy a house or an apartment").

In contrast, contextual resources refer to contextual conditions that shape the level of risk associated with trusting others in society. The literature commonly highlights the role of institutions—such as the legislative process, the sanctioning system, and the effectiveness of law enforcement (Rus, 2005)—as key factors in promoting trust. These institutions are able to reduce the risks associated with trust by ensuring accountability and punishing breaches of trust-based expectations (Rothstein & Stolle, 2010). In line with this perspective, the contextual component is measured through respondents' reported trust in the government (TrG), courts (TrC), and police (TrP). Each of these is assessed using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("No trust at all") to 7 ("Complete trust").

The impact of war is measured through several self-reported indicators that reflect respondents' psychological and behavioral responses to the ongoing conflict. These include: (a) MhC - the perceived effect of the war on mental health (ranging from 1 = "Deteriorated a lot" to 6 = "Did not change at all"); (b) *Sft* - current perceived level of personal security (1 = "Feel entirely unsafe" to 7 = "Feel entirely safe"); and (c) *Alt* - the degree of altruistic orientation (1 = "I do not feel obliged to help others" to 7 = "I feel obliged to help others"). All items are coded such that higher values reflect greater resilience to the effects of war. Additionally, a measure of alignment with the war scope (*UAU*) is included, captured by respondents' assessment of how important they consider it for Ukraine to restore the territorial unity (1 = "Not important at all" to 7 = "Very important"). Respondents who consider territorial unity to be important are classified as belonging to the in-group, while those who do not are considered part of the outgroup.

The model hypothesizes that war influences social trust both directly and indirectly by altering individual and contextual resources. Furthermore, it assumes an interdependent relationship between these two types of resources: individual capacities are shaped by the quality of the context while the context itself can be influenced by the accumulation of individual-level resources. This model is estimated in two stages. First, the measurement model is tested to ensure appropriate specification of latent constructs. Subsequently, the structural model is estimated to assess the relationships between constructs.

Empirical analysis and results

The initial measurement model includes three latent constructs: internal resources (IR), contextual resources (CR), and war (War). The items selected for each construct show statically significant loadings. However, the overall model fit can be considered rather poor (see M1 in Table 1).

Table 1

S	ummary	of	fit	statistics	for	estimate	d mod	lels	,
---	--------	----	-----	------------	-----	----------	-------	------	---

	χ2	df	CFI	TLI	AIC	BIC	SRMR	RMSEA (95% CI)
M1	193.73	32	0.90	0.85	29129.48	29181.27	0.052	0.077 (0.067-0.088)
M2	87.81	29	0.96	0.94	29029.56	29200.39	0.034	0.049 (0.037-0.061)
M3	111.90	37	0.96	0.94	32157.63	32347.44	0.035	0.049 (0.039-0.059)
M4	102.18	36	0.96	0.94	32149.91	32344.46	0.033	0.047 (0.036-0.057)
M5	104.55	37	0.96	0.94	32150.27	32340.08	0.034	0.046 (0.036-0.057)
M6	105.54	37	0.96	0.94	32151.27	32341.08	0.034	0.046 (0.036-0.057)

Notes: CFI: comparative fit index; TLI: tucker-lewis index; AIC: alaike information criterion; BIC: bayesian information criterion; SRMR: standardized root mean square residual; RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation.

To improve the fit of the model, three additional specifications were introduced to the initial M1 as suggested by modification indexes. First, a correlation was specified between confidence in government and confidence in the courts, reflecting the theoretical and empirical overlap in trust toward various institutions. Second, a correlation was added between perceived deterioration in mental health and perceived safety in one's place of residence, acknowledging the likely interdependence between psychological well-being and personal security. Third, a correlation was specified between support for Ukraine's territorial unity and levels of altruism, based on the assumption that a stronger identification with the war is associated with a stronger sense of collective responsibility. These modifications are theoretically grounded and do not compromise the model's validity. In fact, some degree of local dependence between subscales is expected when items from the same construct share conceptual or empirical proximity (Bauer & Curran, 2019).

The modified measurement model (see Figure 1) yields a satisfactory fit (see M2), with all intercepts and variances being statistically significant. Additionally, a strong and statistically significant correlation is observed between war and contextual resources. While the causal direction is not specified, the positive relationship between these two latent variables is consistent with the theoretical understanding that war can deteriorate the quality of the context. Alternatively, the quality of the context may influence how the war impacts individuals. By contrast, correlations between war and individual resources, as well as between individual and contextual resources, are not statistically significant.

Figure 1



Path diagram of the confirmatory analysis for the measurement model

Notes: The standardized estimates are reported for the paths. The numbers adjacent to the observed items and latent variables represent the residual variances. For identification purposes, the means of the latent factors are fixed to 0, and their residual variances are fixed to 1.

Next, a simplified structural model for social trust is estimated (see Figure 2), assuming the dependence of trust on individual and contextual resources and no direct effect of war. The two latent resource variables collectively explain 20 percent of the variation in trust scores across respondents. As in the previous case, a strong correlation is observed between the contextual resource variable and the war, indicating that even in the absence of a direct effect of war on social trust, the war's impact can be mediated through the context. However, the war does not correlate with individual resources, nor do individual resources appear to significantly depend on contextual resources.

Figure 2



Path diagram of a simplified structural model for social trust

Notes: The standardized estimates are reported for the paths. The numbers adjacent to the observed items and latent variables represent the residual variances. For identification purposes, the means of the latent factors are fixed to 0, and their residual variances are fixed to 1.

Further, a more complex model (see M4) was estimated, incorporating a direct effect of war on social trust (see Figure 3). The fit of this model is satisfactory (see M4), while several substantial changes in the estimates are observed. First, including war as a direct determinant of trust increases the explanatory power of the model. As a result, 25 percent of the variation in trust is now accounted for. Second, trust no longer appears to be directly influenced by contextual resources (p > 0.10). Instead, all the effects of the context are now absorbed by the latent war variable. Yet, the association between the latent individual resources variables and

social trust remains statically significant (p < 0.01). Consequently, trust can now be modeled as a function of individual resources and the extent to which the war affects individuals.

Figure 3

Path diagram for the modified structural model with a direct effect of war



Notes: The standardized estimates are reported for the paths. The numbers adjacent to the observed items and latent variables represent the residual variances. For identification purposes, the means of the latent factors are fixed to 0, and their residual variances are fixed to 1.

The strong correlation between environmental resources and the war enables the introduction of a direct effect from the war to the context. However, modeling this effect does not improve the fit of the model (see M5), and chi-square statistics suggest that incorporating this direct effect is not necessary. In contrast, when a direct effect from the contextual resources to the war is introduced (see M6), the model fit improves, albeit only marginally (at the 10% significance level). While modeling the direction of war effects is methodologically questionable, as SEM does not establish causal direction, caution in interpretation can help mitigate this limitation and support the plausibility of the results.

The final model is visualized in Figure 4, and the factor loadings and covariances are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Factor loadings and correlations for the final structural model

	Standardized	z-value	P(> z)					
	loadings							
Latent variables								
War =~								
Mental health deterioration (MhCh)	0.244	3.873	0.000					
Perceived safety (Sft)	0.512	4.941	0.000					
Important to restore territorial unity of	0.328	4.617	0.000					
Ukraine (UAU)								
Altruism (Alt)	0.384	4.875	0.000					
CR =~								
Confidence in the government (TrG)	0.721	19.427	0.000					
Confidence in courts (TrC)	0.700	18.742	0.000					
Confidence in the police (TrP)	0.800	22.130	0.000					
IR =~								
Education (Edc)	0.297	6.881	0.000					

Income (Inc)	0.989	10.579	0.000					
Wealth status (Wlt)	0.489	8.893	0.000					
Regressions								
Social trust (STr) ~								
Individual resources (IR)	0.103	3.112	0.002					
Contextual resources (CR)	0.094	0.597	0.550					
War (War)	0.416	2.960	0.003					
War ~								
Contextual resources (CR)	0.797	4.645	0.000					
Covariances								
Confidence in the government (TrG) ~~	0.185	2.760	0.006					
Confidence in courts (TrC)								
Mental health deterioration (MhCh) ~~	0.165	3.814	0.000					
Perceived safety (Sft)								
Important to restore territorial unity of	0.340	8.110	0.000					
Ukraine (UAU) ~~ Altruism (Alt)								
Contextual resources (CR) ~~ Individual	-0.024	-0.614	0.539					
resources (IR)								

Based on these results, it can be concluded that the war significantly impacts social trust within Ukrainian society. The coefficient for this effect is positive, indicating that individuals who perceive themselves as less affected by the war tend to exhibit higher levels of trust in others. Conversely, those who feel more intensely affected by the war are more likely to display lower levels of trust in others. However, the broader context of the country appears to influence the extent to which war affects trust. Individuals who express confidence in key public institutions tend to feel more resilient to the effects of the war. This suggests that well-defined and enforced institutions can cushion the negative impact of the war on social trust, likely by reducing risks involved in trusting during conflict. Alternatively, it is possible to say that the perception of being affected by the war may influence individuals' confidence in institutions. Specifically, as a function of institutional performance, confidence in public institutions tends to decline during conflict, as individuals who feel more affected by the war may attribute their distress to the failure of these institutions to protect them.

Figure 4



Path diagram for the final structural model

Notes: The standardized estimates are reported for the paths. The numbers adjacent to the observed items and latent variables represent the residual variances. For identification purposes, the means of the latent factors are fixed to 0, and their residual variances are fixed to 1.

Overall, the war can be expected to reduce trust among Ukrainians, which is not surprising given the multiple negative effects that the ongoing conflict produces on individuals, such as deteriorations in mental health, sense of insecurity, etc. Interestingly, these items can provide additional insights: On the one hand, perceived safety in one's place of residence is positively correlated with mental health deterioration. Since mental health is measured on a reverse scale, the positive estimate suggests that individuals who feel safer are less psychologically affected by the war. This aligns with previous research indicating that mental health is often severely impacted by conflict (Kurapov et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the positive correlation between the importance individuals place on maintaining Ukraine's territorial unity and their level of altruism suggests that those who are more committed to the idea of "war till the end" (i.e., advocating for the return of every occupied territory) are more likely to exhibit a stronger propensity to help others and cooperate. This is consistent with existing studies showing that altruism tends to increase during wartime, particularly among in-group members united by a common cause, such as resistance against a shared enemy (Rohner et al., 2013).

Conclusions

In summary, the results suggest that the war is likely to lead to a decline in social trust among the population of Ukraine. This decline is dangerous as it can have significant consequences for social cohesion within Ukrainian society. However, as the analysis indicates, improving the quality of institutions could substantially enhance the trust-building process. This means, that Ukraine should focus on strengthening and developing formal institutions to mitigate the negative effects of the war on trust in others. Such efforts would reduce the risks associated with trust during or after the war and increase the collective effort for a rapid and effective recovery of the country.

References

Bauer, D.J. & Curran, P.J. (2019). Structural equation modeling: R demonstration notes (Vers ion 2019.3). Curran-

Bauer Analytics, Durham: NC. URL https://curranbauer.org/sem-r-notes-2019-3/

Bellows, J., & Miguel, E. (2006). War and institutions: New evidence from Sierra Leone. *American Economic Review*, 96(2), 394–399.

https://doi.org/10.1257/000282806777212323

- Bjornskov, C. (2005). *The determinants of trust* (Working paper). University of Aarhus. Downloaded from <u>https://cms.ratio.se/app/uploads/2006/02/working-paper-no.-86.-</u> <u>christian-bjornskov-2006.-the-determinants-of-trust..pdf</u>
- Cassar, A., Grosjean, P., & Whitt, S. (2013). Legacies of violence: Trust and market development. *Journal of Economic Growth*, *18*(3), 285–318.
- Delhey, J., & Newton, K. (2003). Who trusts? The origins of social trust in seven societies. *European Societies*, 5(2), 93–137.
- Dohmen, T., Falk, A., Huffman, D., & Sunde, U. (2012). The intergenerational transmission of risk and trust attitudes. *The Review of Economic Studies*, 79(2), 645–677. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23261346
- Fiedler, C. (2023). What do we know about how armed conflict affects social cohesion? A review of the empirical literature. *International Studies Review*.
 <u>https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad030</u>
- Gilligan, M. J., Pasquale, B. J., & Samii, C. (2014). Civil war and social cohesion: Lab-in-the-field evidence from Nepal. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(3), 604–619.

- Hall, J., & Werner, K. (2022). Trauma and trust: How war exposure shapes social and institutional trust among refugees. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 786838. <u>https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.786838</u>
- Kurapov, A., Kalaitzaki, A., Keller, V., Danyliuk, I., & Kowatsch, T. (2023). The mental health impact of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war 6 months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, Article 32–42. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1134780
- Lewis, J. S., & Topal, S. A. (2023). Proximate exposure to conflict and the spatiotemporal correlates of social trust. *Political Psychology*, 44(3), 667–687. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12864
- Molm, L. D., Takahashi, N., & Peterson, G. (2000). Risk and trust in social exchange: An experimental test of a classical proposition. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 105(5), 1396–1427.
- Rohner, D., Thoenig, M., & Zilibotti, F. (2013). Seeds of distrust: Conflict in Uganda. Journal of Economic Growth, 18(3), 217–252. <u>http://www.jstor.org/stable/42635325</u>
- Rothstein, B., & Stolle, D. (2010). The state and social capital: An institutional theory of generalized trust. In M. Kesselman (Ed.), *Readings in comparative politics: Political challenges and changing agendas* (pp. 123–128). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Rus, A. (2005). Trust and performance: Institutional, interpersonal and network trust. In K.
 Bijlsma-Frankema & R. Klein Woolthuis (Eds.), *Trust under pressure: Empirical investigations of trust and trust building in uncertain circumstances* (pp. 80–104).
 Edward Elgar.