



# Current status of oral history initiatives in Ukraine

Analytical report on the results of comprehensive survey



# SURVEY DESIGN

**Method of collecting information:**

- 1. Qualitative stage:** in-depth interviews with experts
- 2. Quantitative stage:** self-completion of questionnaires in the Gradus mobile application
- 3. Analysis of open sources**

**Target group of the survey:**

- 10 experts, namely representatives of educational, governmental and independent institutions of Ukraine, museums of history and national memory, as well as documentalists engaged in oral history in Ukraine
- 1,041 women and men, aged 18-60, living on the territory of Ukraine, in cities with a population of 50K+ (except for temporarily occupied territories and territories where hostilities are taking place).

**Survey period:** 27 September – 2 October 2023



## ORAL STORY:

definition of the concept  
and key functions

# Definition of oral story

**ORAL STORY** as a scientific research, human-centered in its form and content, is a prepared, recorded, interpreted, preserved and published according to a certain methodology and forms of documenting, **historical or evidential source** (at the level of other historical sources and evidence of a crime against an individual or a particular social group/people/nation) **in the form** of a narration, a personal story about a subjective, usually traumatic experience and experienced emotions and feelings of a direct eyewitness to **significant historical events or everyday life that have long passed, or exist** in the unfinished past, as well as in the present.

# Definition of oral story

If the research covers the diversity of eyewitnesses by their social, ethnic, age groups, gender, etc. and records the recurrence of subjective experiences, types of experiences in describing facts and events, then such a **research can claim to be an objective historical source.**

# Features of oral story

- **The basic value** of oral story research is trust between the researcher and the eyewitness, as well as positive communication between them
- A frequent **motive of the eyewitness** to the story is a conscious desire to share the experience in order to punish evil, bring those who caused evil to justice
- **The main requirement** of oral story research when working with the narrator's memory is **not to harm or re-traumatize the eyewitness**
- An oral story told by an eyewitness can have a **therapeutic effect** for him/her



*And I would say, I can definitely say that the vast majority of people talk about bringing [those guilty] to justice. Even those who have nothing left, you know, only the foundation, but they want the people who did it to be taken to responsibility for it.*

**Expert (No.5)**



*Oral story is... primarily about human emotions that are not always documented, ...impressions, people's attitude to some historical events and their experiences... (as well as) how people perceive, how they live through their own experiences.*

**Expert (No.4)**

# How are the collected oral stories disseminated, shared, and used?

## Scientific Plane

- scientific bases for scientific research, research itself, and analytical reports (historical, sociological, psychological, legal, ethnographic, etc.)
- methodological elaborations on how to work with oral stories

## Legal Plane

- testimonies for justice and appeals to courts

## Public Plane

- scientific, political, social discourses
- museum memory files (e.g. victim profiles) / museum platforms / practices / exhibitions
- journalistic projects
- bases for public historical projects / for educational / awareness-raising work (multimedia projects, international media projects, stationary and mobile exhibitions, etc.)
- creative/art products (historical, documentary films, oral story collections, printed and electronic fiction books (including in a foreign language), television programs, podcasts, graphic novels, works of fiction, works of art, etc.)
- therapeutic projects (including the "Living Library")



# EMPHASIS IN COLLECTING STORIES



## Methodologists

Friendliness for eyewitness

Safety of both parties

Methodology and ethics of data collection

## Practitioners

Efficiency/promptness of collecting and documenting stories

Building up volumes/scope

Preventing burnout of team collecting stories

## ORAL STORY:

features of information  
sources, and challenges

# ORAL STORY AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION



Oral story is the source of truth when it comes to documenting crimes, but "truth" is a subjective and philosophical category.

## What influences the truthfulness of an oral story?

**Narrator and event.** The context of the event. Is the person within the event? What is their temporal and spatial distance from the event? Their perception of the event. What is their involvement in the event? What is the involvement of the narrator's relatives and friends in this event? The depth of the narrator's trauma caused by the event. The narrator's motivation to share the story.

**Narrator at the time of the interview.** Their emotional state. Their sense of safety. The presence of other people during the interview, besides the researcher and the narrator.

**Personality of the narrator.** The narrators and their values. The narrator and her/his emotional intelligence.

**Storytelling skills.** The narrator's ability to reflect on her/his own experience. The narrator's ability to analyze the event. Using knowledge about the event. The level of fiction and the "desire to appropriate the plot" where the information is not remembered or is missing. Skills to reconstruct events (also the memory level).

# ORAL STORY AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION



*That is, it is the same question: can we believe that someone's voice, yours or mine, is an absolute carrier of absolute truth. Oral story is an additional or one of the parallel sources with other sources in historical research...*

**Expert (No.6)**



**The main challenge is the responsibility for the formation of narratives about the war**



*...who are you? What are you? and why do you do it? What is your purpose? Where will this text be published?*



*“And what are we exploring now, during those one and a half years since the war began?”, “How many scientifically formulated research goals do we have?” ...Not only how we will conduct it, but how we will store it, and the main thing, what we will do with it later. It should be in our mind in advance, when we are going to record it.*

Expert (No.2).



# ORAL STORY: CHALLENGES

- **the war continues, this is not a finished event** – oral stories are collected in the conditions of an ongoing event, and this requires new methodological approaches
- **both researchers and storytellers are traumatized** – the impact of the interviewer on the narrator, on the course of the interview, how he/she should behave, while working with a traumatic experience
- **large volumes of work** – a large amount of evidence requires methodical collection, processing, preservation and publication; the methodology requires certain procedures to be performed, in reality – there is limited staff to perform these procedures
- **insufficient number of professional staff** – insufficient professionalism of specialists who work with the oral story method, since this is not their main specialty, oral story is often dealt with by civil society organizations that learn theoretical knowledge through practice



# Aspects of collecting stories that require special attention

## The collection and analysis of oral story in conditions of war should be built out on expert platforms

### Oral story is a subjective vision of an event by a person

- inveracity of the story (intentional, unintentional (did not know – thought out/made up))
- subjective judgments/self-assessment of his/her behavior by the narrator
- oral story can become an object of manipulation of public consciousness and national memory
- uncritical approach to the source



**The picture of reality is not static, and so is the oral story. The narrator's life circumstances change rapidly**

- the narrator wants to recover, changes the space around her/him, because she/he does not want to stay in the trauma for a long time – this affects their desire to tell the story
- one story entails other stories, war causes a large flow of stories from the same narrator
- oral story is not an autobiography, because the events have not yet ended, and the story is growing out into new stories

**The war is still going on.  
The methodology has not been honed, but speed is  
important.**

- work "from the wheels", hence some errors in the methodology happen
- perfectionism/mega responsibility in collecting stories, failure to collect enough evidence for the sake of restoring justice (oral story is collected as evidence of war crimes and will be used against the invader), sampling not formed (we work on the general sampling)
- fear of "losing memory" over time (the importance of collecting the story together with the captured emotion)

## The methodology and procedure for collecting oral stories requires consistency and accuracy

- methodological substantiation of the project
- access to the scene of event, to narrator
- accuracy of transcripts
- account of the context of conversation (do not collect the story beyond/outside its context)
- ethics of working with trauma
- keeping a distance between the researcher and the narrator
- archiving procedures
- preservation and safety of stories
- the safety of the narrator and the interviewer
- interpretation and use of evidence based on oral stories

## Organizations involved in documenting oral stories

# Organizations involved in documenting oral stories

The Museum of Civilian Voices



*After the Silence* NGO



Ukrainian Association of Oral History



Center for Civil Liberties



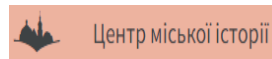
Ukrainian Institute of National Memory



*Past/Future/Art* NGO



Center for Urban History



*DocuDays (War Archive)* NGO



Public Interest Journalism Lab



Abo Media Agency



*(Memorial Memory Platform)*

Dattalion



# NUMBER OF STORIES COLLECTED BY ORGANIZATION

The Museum of Civilian Voices **86,483\***



Past/Future/Art NGO **20+\*\*\***

МИНУЛЕ/  
МАЙБУТНЄ  
/МИСТЕЦТВО

Center for Civil Liberties **54,831\*\***



Ukrainian Association of Oral History **n/a**



Ukrainian Institute of National Memory **1,600+\***



After the Silence NGO **n/a**



Abo Media Agency  
(Memorial Memory Platform) **4,788\*\*\***



Center for Urban History **n/a**



DocuDays (War Archive) NGO **440\***



Public Interest Journalism Lab **n/a**



Dattalion **243\*\*\***

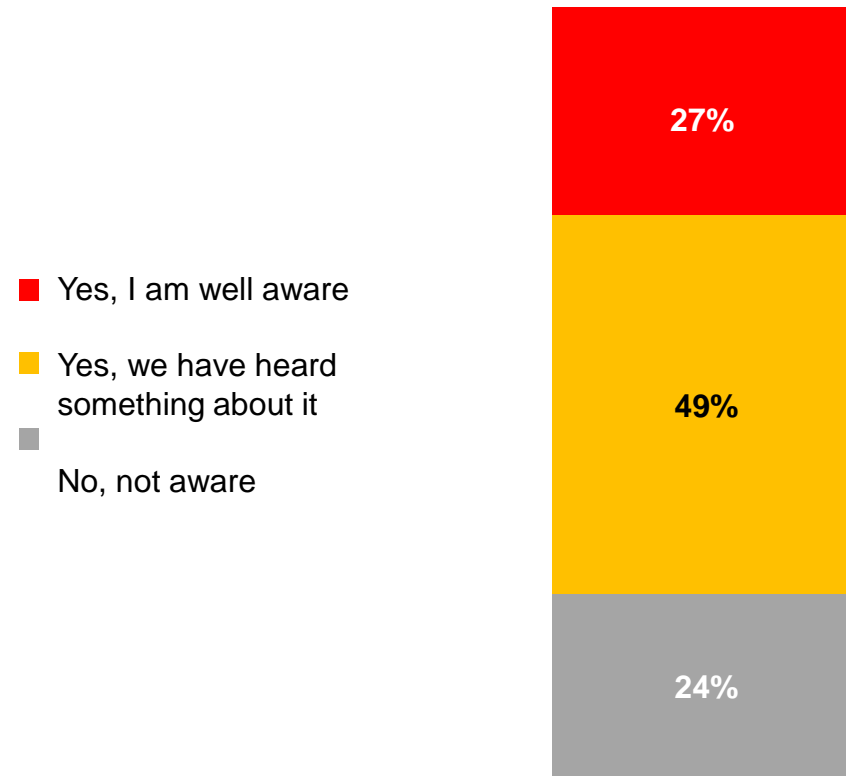


\*Number of stories listed in project descriptions on organizations' websites

\*\* Consolidated number of stories collected as part of the T4P initiative (<https://t4pua.org/1200>), which brought together more than 20 NGOs and of which the CCL (Center for Civil Liberties) is a part

\*\*\* Number of stories received upon an enquiry sent to the organization

# Awareness of the fact war-time events are documented not only by law enforcement/state agencies, but also by other organizations and scientific institutions



Base: all respondents, N=1,041

Do you know that eyewitness accounts of the events of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine are documented not only by law enforcement and government agencies, but also by other organizations and scientific institutions?

# Awareness, when organizations documenting testimonies about war-time events are prompted

	Total	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-60
Ukrainian Institute of National Memory	40%	55%	32%	33%	37%	60%
Center for Civil Liberties	17%	28%	15%	14%	21%	13%
Abo Media Agency (Memorial Memory Platform)	12%	26%	8%	11%	7%	14%
The Museum of Civilian Voices	11%	24%	18%	7%	4%	13%
DocuDays (War Archive) NGO	9%	21%	10%	8%	3%	11%
Center for Urban History	8%	12%	5%	7%	8%	10%
Ukrainian Association of Oral History	8%	16%	9%	8%	2%	8%
After the Silence NGO	6%	13%	9%	6%	2%	4%
Public Interest Journalism Lab (PIJL)	6%	19%	5%	6%	1%	6%
Past/Future/Art NGO	6%	18%	6%	5%	3%	3%
Dattalion	3%	14%	4%	2%	0,5%	
N=	796	87	177	236	180	116

Quantitative stage

Base: respondents who are well aware, as well as those who have heard something about it  
Which organizations involved in documenting (photo/video/audio/interviews) evidence of the events of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine are you aware of?



# Followers of organizations in social media: total quantity

The Museum of Civilian Voices	693 000
Ukrainian Institute of National Memory	146 300
Memorial Platform	91 531
Center for Civil Liberties	22 168
Center for Urban History	16 776
Dattalion	14 958
After the Silence NGO	6 246
Past/Future/Art NGO	6 208
Public Interest Journalism Lab	4 653
Ukrainian Association of Oral History	179
War archive	42

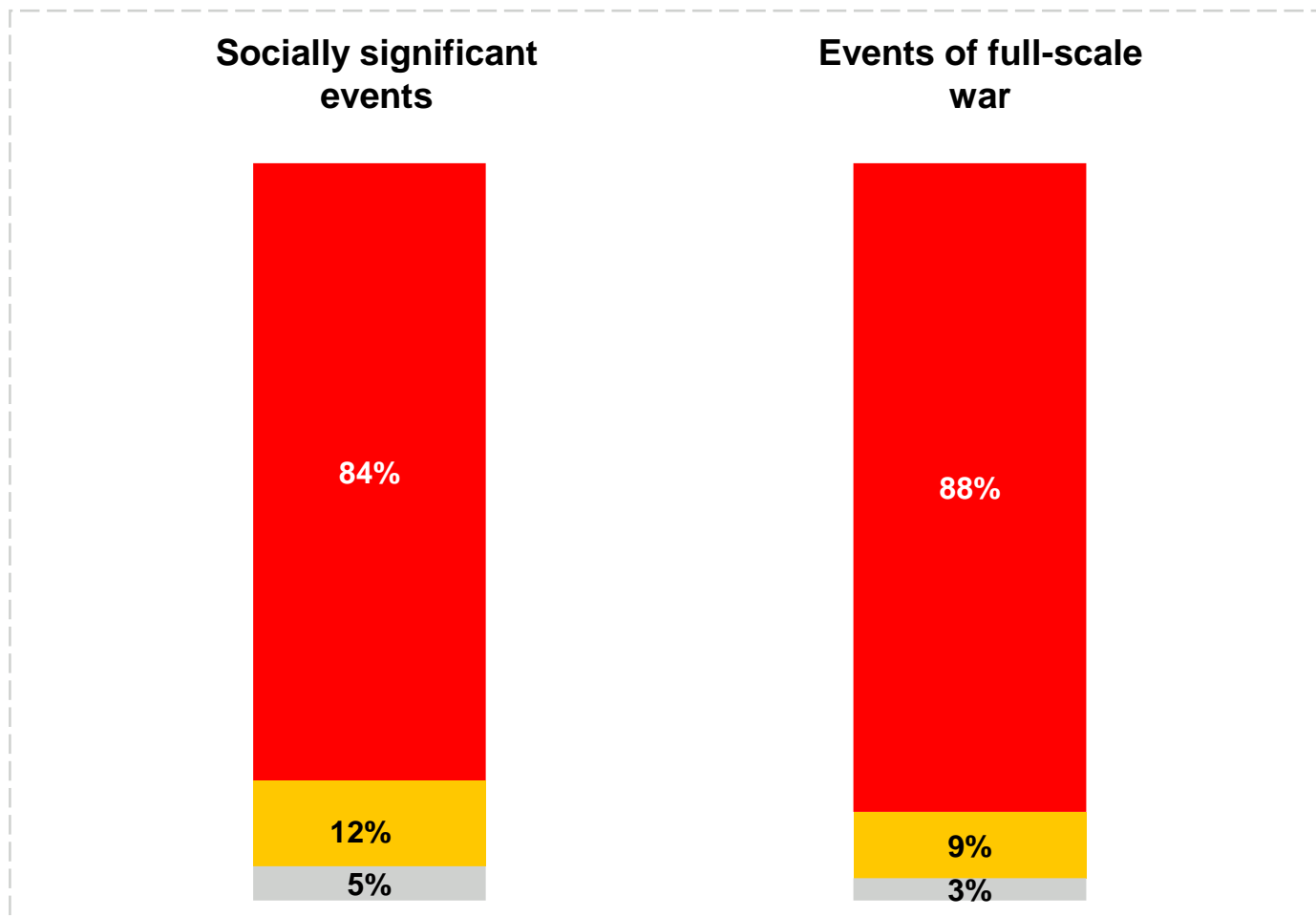


**Importance of documenting  
oral stories/testimonies for  
society**

# How important it is to document the testimonies of eyewitnesses of socially significant events and events of the full-scale war



- Important (very+rather)
- Unimportant (very+rather)
- Difficult to answer

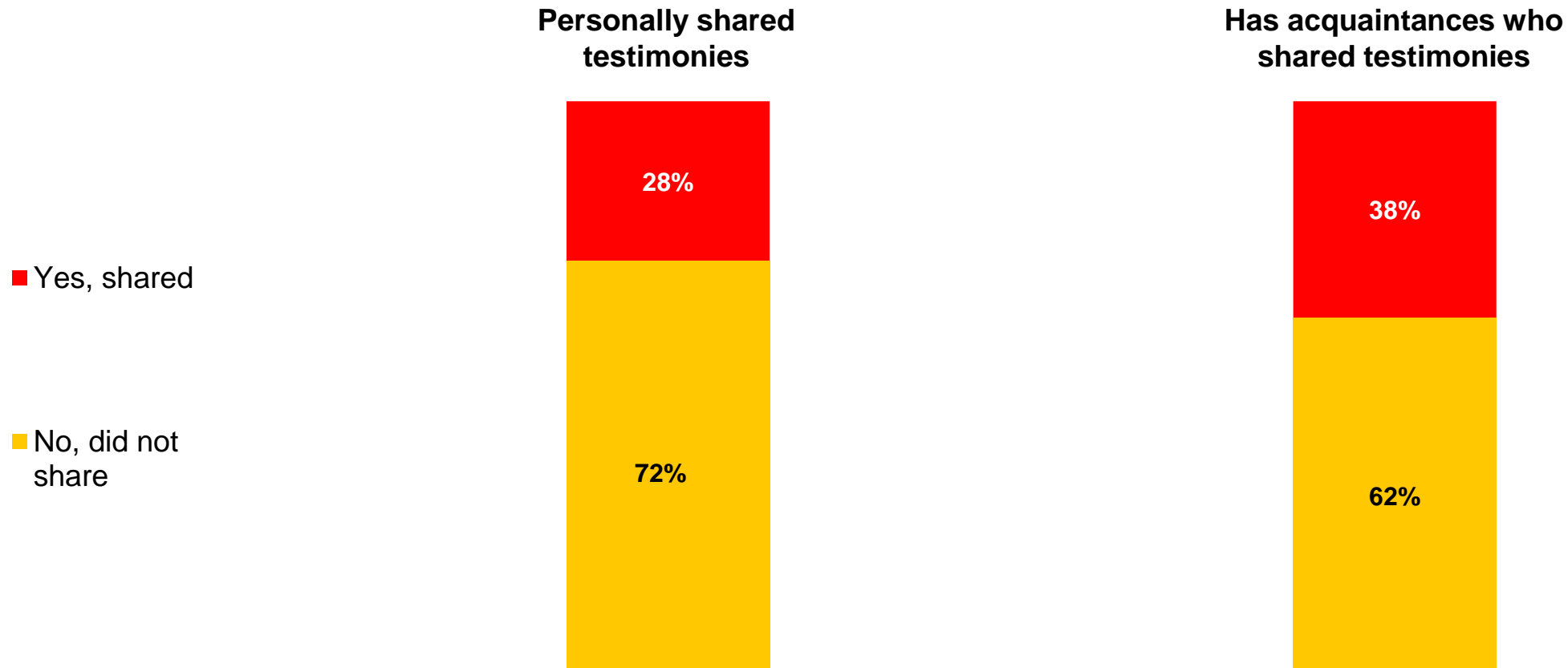


Base: all respondents, N=1,041

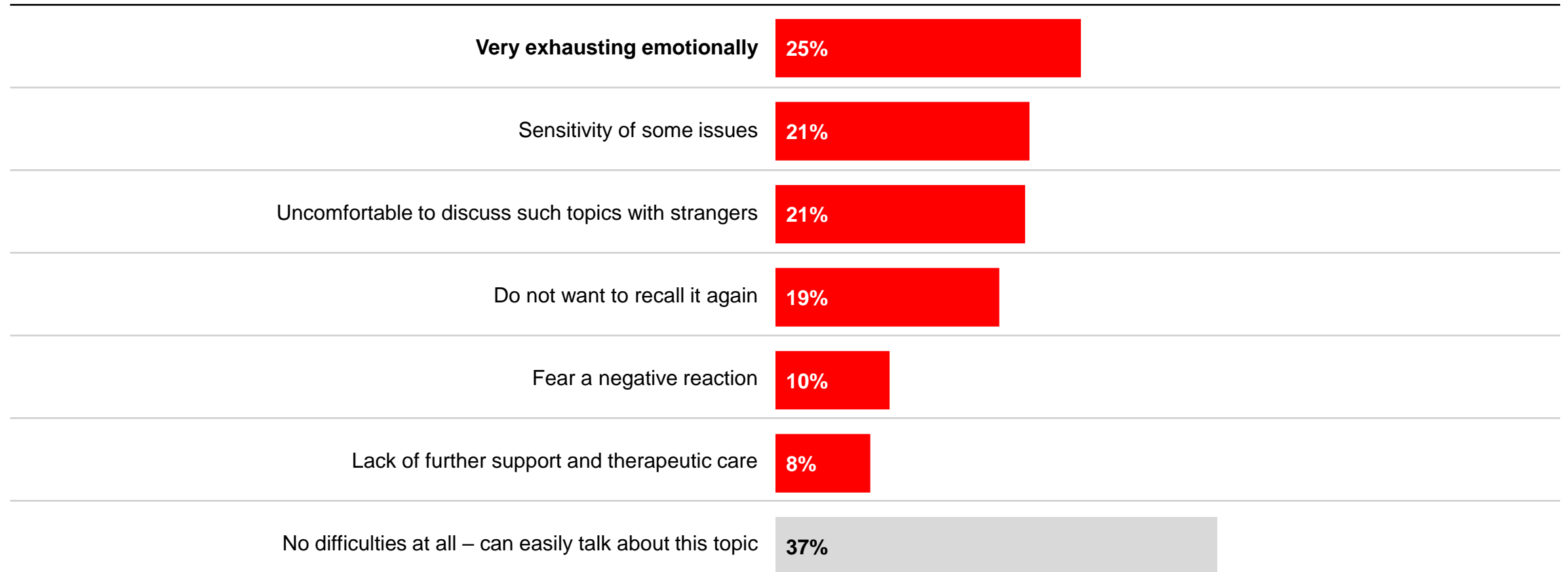
In your opinion, is it important to document the testimonies of eyewitnesses of socially significant events?

In your opinion, is it important to document the testimonies of eyewitnesses of the events of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine?

# Personal experience of witnessing the events of the full-scale war



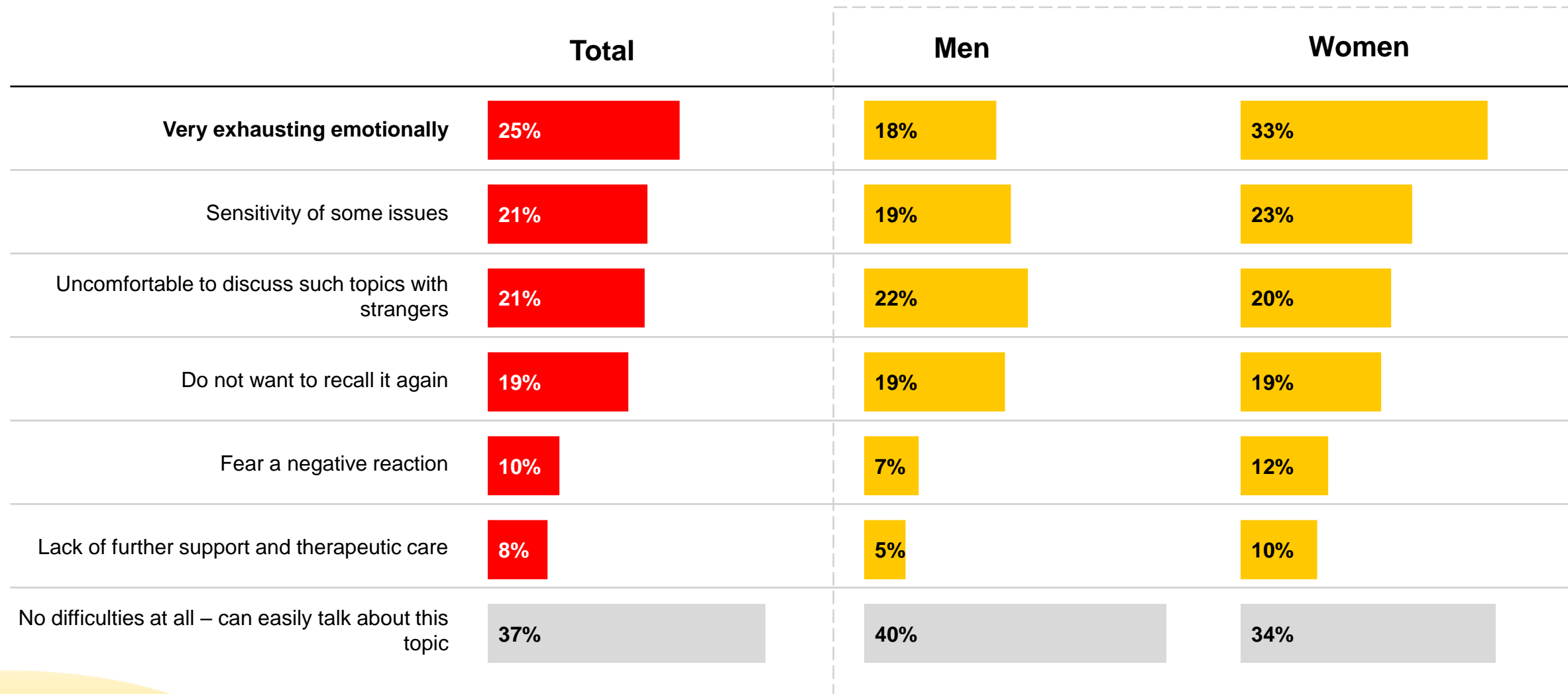
# Reasons that restrain from sharing the experiences of the war



Quantitative  
stage

Base: all respondents, N=1,041  
Choose reasons that may restrain you from sharing your personal experience about the events of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine?

# Reasons that restrain from sharing the experiences of the war

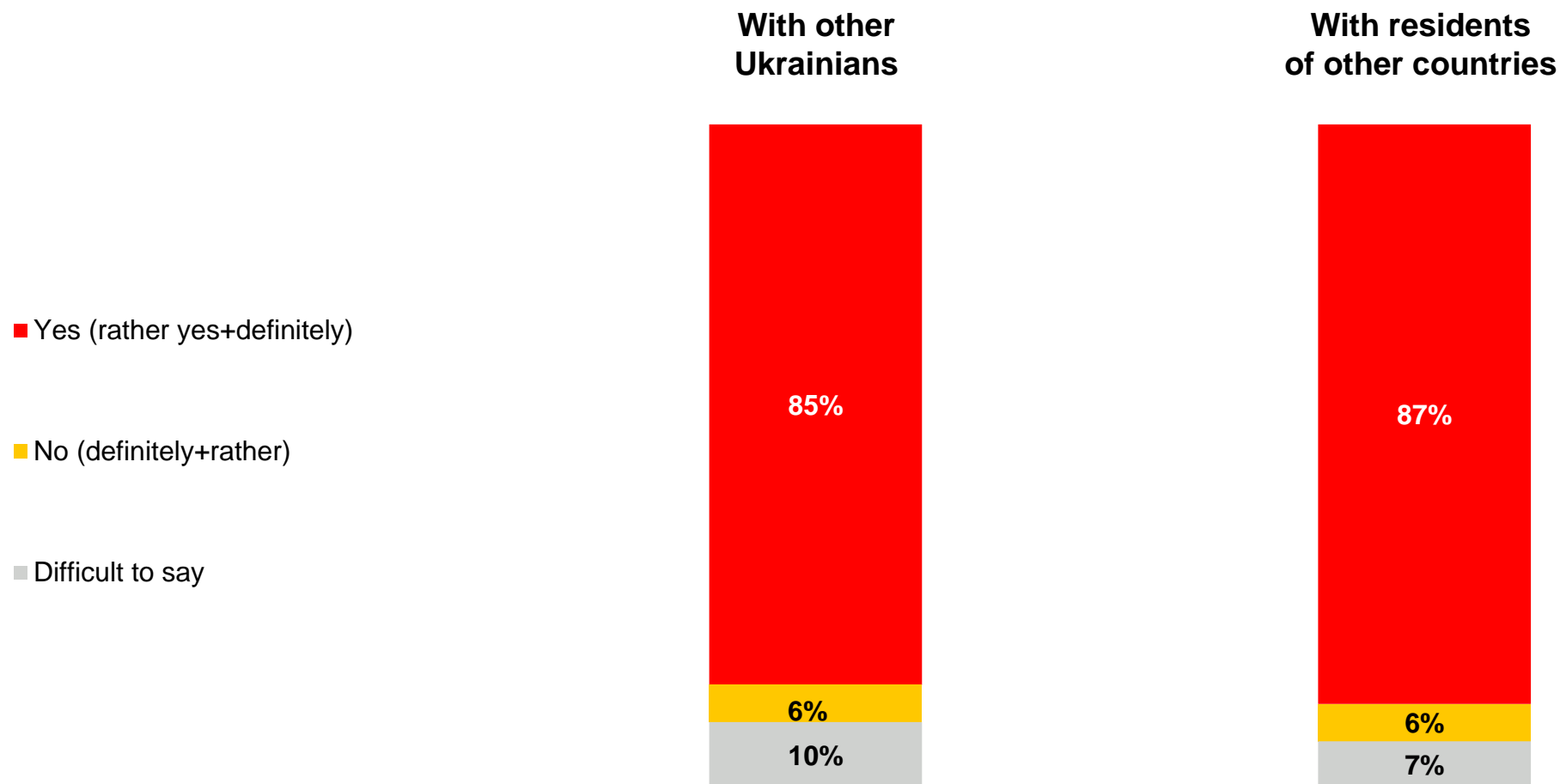


Quantitative stage

Base: all respondents, N=1,041

Choose reasons that may restrain you from sharing your personal experience about the events of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine?

# The need to share testimonies about the events of the full-scale war with Ukrainians and residents of other countries



# Summarized conclusions:



Documenting stories is important to society

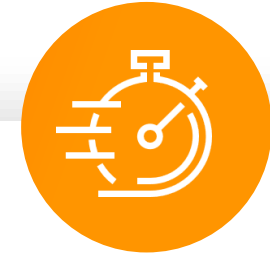
to remember and record the experiences of the war



Collecting oral stories requires friendly environment and thoughtfulness because both parties are traumatized



Speed and volume of documentation matter  
Capturing events at the moment of history, reaching the level of an objective image



Oral stories are a way of addressing the trauma of society  
without waiting for the completion of the historical episode



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Ф О Н Д



**Голоси Мирних**

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