HYBRID RESILIENCE IN INSECURE TIMES:
RUSSIA'S WAR AND UKRAINIAN SOCIETY

Two broad conclusions may be drawn from the ongoing war in Ukraine: on the one hand, Russia's abilities to wage a hybrid war were overrated and most of the non-military components of Russian power turned out to be deficient; on the other hand, the scale and scope of Ukraine's ability to resist the aggression was underestimated. This resistance is built through a combination of multiple forms and practices of resilience as societal characteristics of self-help, self-reliance and self-organisation, which are distinct from the top-down emergency governance response. This «hybrid resilience» is grounded in a decentralised form of governance, sustainability of societal networks, reliable information policy and strong public adherence to the idea of a «just war».

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Since 2014, Moscow has attempted to integrate hybrid tools into its anti-Ukrainian policy. Yet, the military invasion of Ukraine has ended up with a rather traditional type of warfare aimed at the physical destruction of Ukrainian military and non-military infrastructure, rather than at diversifying policy tools to minimise the hard power component of Russia's overall strategy. The two core elements of the hybrid war concept – «non-linear warfare» and «reflexive control» – were integrated into the initial stage of the war, when Crimea was annexed and the war-by-proxies in Donbas started, but faded away in 2022. The Kremlin failed to effectively use institutional and communicative power: its wartime propaganda has only limited purchase in the Western information space; and its cyberattacks were not a game-changer and its soft power potential was destroyed by the brutality of the invasion.

At the same time the scale and scope of Ukrainian resilience was underestimated. Ukraine, which has often been perceived in the West as a weak, Russia-dependent and peripheral country that did not do much to resist the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbas in 2014, has regained its subjectivity through the capacity to survive and strikeback against its more resourceful invader. We argue that hybrid resilience is the crux of Ukraine's survival as a nation via the political subjectivity and agency of its civil society, and we single out the key components of the Ukrainian model of resilience.

Resilience: The pedigree of the concept

The extant literature generally understands resilience as a process of societal adaptation to complex shocks. By and large, resilience implies adaptation, partnership and self-reliance of individuals and communities. It envisages «shifting of responsibility onto communities and promotion of reflexive self-governance through strategies of awareness, risk management and adaptability» (Humbert & Joseph, 2019: 216). «Resilient people do not look to governments to secure and improve their well-being because they have been disciplined into believing in the necessity to secure and improve it for themselves» (Reid, 2018: 648). Consequently, individuals and groups are ultimately responsible for their own adaptability vis-à-vis external transgressions, including foreign interventions.

However, we contest the opinion of authors who believe that in exceptional times resilience «discourages active citizenship» and even puts «into jeopardy the concept of public space» (Juntunen and Hyvönen, 2014: 196). On the contrary, the Ukrainian experience proves that resilience is deeply political, since it «seeks to empower people to be agents of their own vulnerability reduction in order to make the proper choices and avoid maladaptation in an emergent environment» (Grove, 2014: 244). Therefore, everyday resilience practices «create subjects» (Cavelty et al., 2015: 9): civil society organisations, grassroots groups and networks are key sources of a strategy for survival and human security.

Hybrid resilience: Ukrainian experience

Sociological data from a recent survey indicates a high level of resilience among Ukrainians[1] – 3.9 points out of a possible 5. In this rating, resilience

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1. https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/b29c8b7d5de3de02ef3a697573281953.html

consists of two indicators: physical health and psychological well-being and comfort, including interest in life, feeling of usefulness, ability to make decisions and plans for the future and lack of regret for the past. However, in this section we look at resilience from a broader perspective and single out six key characteristics that make the Ukrainian experience of resilience during the war a hybrid phenomenon.

First, the need for resilience emerged from the sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis Russian aggression, which the country's leadership translated into a vision of self-reliance. The war in Ukraine began not on February 24th 2022, but in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the Russian military infiltration of Donbas. After fighting for Ilovaisk, Donetsk airport and Debaltseve in 2014, Ukraine realized its weaknesses, creating a kind of collective trauma that was even more painful as Western countries had not yet introduced strong punitive sanctions against Russia. The restrictions imposed have neither stopped the war in Donbas nor prevented the Kremlin from further offensives, but they have in the meantime fuelled a sense of frustration with Western allies in Ukraine. The EU welcomed Ukraine's «European aspirations», yet without clear prospects of granting full membership, raising questions about the most feasible formula of partnership and the most plausible scenario of European integration in Ukraine.

UKRAINIAN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS HAVE LARGELY REMAINED FUNCTIONAL DURING THE CURRENT WAR, INCLUDING IN THE REGIONS MOST AFFECTED BY RUSSIA'S MILITARY ACTIVITIES. THEIR RESILIENCE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT PROLONGED SUPPORT FROM THE EU, INCLUDING THE TRANSFER OF EUROPEAN GOOD GOVERNANCE PRACTICES TO UKRAINE.

Volodymyr Zelensky won the presidency because he managed to capture these widespread sentiments better than his predecessor Petro Poroshenko. Having stated that Ukraine, as a «European country», «begins with each of us», Zelensky addressed the issues of values and policy reforms without making the EU the major reference point. Much less emphasis was put on divisive issues of ethnic and linguistic identity. Zelensky's practical and pragmatic agenda found broad support across the country and clearly captured public demands for self-help and resilience.

Second, Ukrainian public institutions have largely remained functional during the current war, including in the regions most affected by Russia's military activities. Their resilience would not have been possible without prolonged

support from the EU, including the transfer of European good governance practices to Ukraine. Decentralisation and self-governance reforms have been fundamental elements of Ukraine's engagement with foreign political and civil actors (non-governmental and educational organisations, think tanks and the media), which have had a visible impact on Ukrainian decision-makers. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has added a great deal to Ukraine's preparedness for future challenges, including the growing ability of regional and municipal public authorities to perform their functions remotely under the strict conditions of supervision and control.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND CIVIL SOCIETY HAVE BEEN ESSENTIAL TO RESILIENCE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. IN THE EARLY STAGES OF THE RUSSIA INVASION, THERE WAS A HEAVY RELIANCE ON NGOS AND FIRST-TIME RELIEF ACTORS, SUCH AS VOLUNTEERS, RATHER THAN ON THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT. MOREOVER, UKRAINIAN NGOS HAVE OFTEN SUBSTITUTED FOR INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND HAVE DELIVERED AID TO THE BESIEGED CITIES OR FACILITATED THE EVACUATION OF CIVILIANS.

Third, the war displayed mechanisms through which social capital and family networks become helpful elements of hybrid resilience. These mechanisms include the elimination of barriers to collective action, as well as the provision of informal assurance and mutual aid. Ties between relatives, neighbours and communities serve as a critical engine in resilience-building and, according to a survey, 94% of respondents claim to have peaceful relations within their families, 89% with neighbours and 67% with strangers. Members of large families from the war-torn regions have found refuge in the western part of Ukraine. Neighbourhoods where residents relied on mutual help and assistance were better able to overcome shared problems (such as looting) and the likelihood was higher of displaced persons' eventual return to their homes. These practices of grass-roots resilience are substantial components of Ukraine's development as a modern networked open society where the middle class has proven capable of taking social and financial responsibility in previous crises, including the Maidan revolution, and nowadays in the war with Russia.

Fourth, social networks and civil society have been essential to resilience at the local level. In the early stages of the Russia invasion, there was a heavy reliance on NGOs and first-time relief actors, such as volunteers, rather than on the central government. Moreover, Ukrainian NGOs have often substituted for international organisations and have delivered aid to the besieged cities or facilitated the evacuation of civilians. Most national and local NGOs, religious networks, civil society organisations and a

considerable number of newly emerged volunteer networks are providing vital humanitarian aid in most cities affected by the war.

Fifth, information resilience matters too. The fact that the full-scale Russian invasion was preceded by a hybrid war has helped Ukraine gain some experience in countering Russian propaganda. In contrast to Russia, before the war Ukrainian media were characterised by diversity and pluralism of opinions, and since the full-scale invasion Ukraine has not introduced military censorship, although coverage sometimes suffers from over-optimism. Free online media creates opportunities for volunteers, human rights defenders and journalists to record war crimes. The high level of emotional support to – and symbolic identification with – Ukraine in many Western media serves as an additional mobilising force for domestic resistance.

Sixth, the ethical and value-based dimensions of resilience are of utmost importance: the fundamental difference is that Ukraine is waging a war of self-defence (for its survival and future), while Russia is waging an aggressive war (for expansion and to recover the past). For Ukraine, it is first and foremost a liberating and just war that mobilises and unites the nation for the sake of defending the independence of the country. For Russia, this is a neo-imperialist war aimed at restoring a bygone empire, drawing on ideas of zones of influence and great power management.

The EU's role

The EU played a crucial role in all the six mentioned factors contributing to Ukraine's hybrid resilience after the war restarted in February 2022. This is unsurprising given that it was largely the EU that produced and promoted resilience discourses and practices towards the eastern and southern neighbourhoods. Since 2014, Western assistance programmes have been instrumental in facilitating reforms in Ukraine and creating favourable conditions for economic and social integration. The EU–Ukraine Association Agreement concluded in 2014 is the EU's most comprehensive with any third country. Ukraine has received €14 billion from the EU, an unprecedented level of financial support, which made an important contribution to the reification of resilience practices, as defined by the EU in its Global Strategy as the ability of «states and societies to reform thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises».

On March 18th 2020, the European Commission presented the «Eastern Partnership beyond 2020: Reinforcing Resilience – an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all», which emphasised the positive results achieved in three out of four priority areas (stronger economy, stronger connectivity

and stronger society) in the work plan «20 Deliverables for 2020». As regards the stronger governance priority area, the document advocated «the need to significantly improve results» in the governance sphere connected with anti-corruption efforts and empowerment of civil society. Decentralisation and self-governance reforms in Ukraine have been among the pillars of this process. Beyond that, EU assistance is instrumental in supporting civil society, free media and grassroot activism in Ukraine. Should the EU keep prioritising the strengthening of resilience through facilitating local ownership and bottom-up engagements that encompass the whole of society, Ukraine will be on the right track for prompt post-conflict recovery based on European norms of democracy, transparency and good governance.

Resilience has become a backbone for a new Ukrainian subjectivity in Europe as a nation capable of fighting not only for its own independence and territorial integrity, but also for broader European security.

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