

# POST-WAR DEMOCRACY IN UKRAINE AND WAR-BORN CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** The importance of studying the stabilizing and rebuilding of a democratic society in a post-war context of Ukraine cannot be overstated. Ukraine provides an essential case study in this regard due to the ongoing war waged by the Russian Federation in 2014 with the full-scale invasion phase starting on February 24, 2022.

The study of Ukraine's post-war reconstruction relies on recognizing the existing challenges and transforming them into the opportunities in the post-war period. The objective of this paper is to investigate and analyze the process of democratic reconstruction in Ukraine, taking into account war-born challenges.

**Keywords:** post-war Ukraine, democracy, resilience, volunteer networks

## *Introduction*

This paper serves as the continuation of the discussion that took place on June 6, 2023 under the main title “Developing society’s post-war resilience in Ukraine – Perspectives and challenges - defence of democracy.”

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Such a multi-folded approach gave way to covering a broad set of issues connected with the growing number of challenges that the world faces at this point in time.

Another significant and grim event that took place the same day was the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant in the Kherson region of Ukraine by Russian forces. As per the statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine issued on June 6, "the Russian Federation's detonation of the dam of the KHPP is a terrorist act against Ukrainian critical infrastructure, which aims to cause as many civilian casualties and destruction as possible. The terrorist attack on the Kakhovka HPP was previously intensely discussed at the level of the occupation forces in the Kherson region and propagandists on Russian television, which indicates that it was planned in advance." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2023)

This level of technological and ecological disaster has not been witnessed in Europe in recent decades and is only one in the chain of events that comprise a definite, premeditated, and decisive approach of the Russian Federation towards a neighboring sovereign country. This approach can be labeled as the genocide against Ukrainians, aiming at making the most prolific territories in Ukraine uninhabited and devastated. Citing the same statement of Ukrainian MFA, this was the Kremlin's response to countries calling for peace talks with the Russian Federation.

This particular example alone serves as a supporting argument for the destructive actions that aggressor Russia takes. The Russian Federation is a perturber of the existing world order and international security system. There hardly is a better time for discussing resilience, society during and post-war as well as the growing need to defend democracy - the basis and the

value of all free societies under non-authoritarian regimes in the EU and the world.

### ***Resilient democracy under attack***

The first issue deserving attention is the very fact of how the question of the future of Ukraine's democracy is seen from the external perspective. There still are some who consider that Ukraine is not a democracy as is, and that this aspect of society's development when the war is over needs an in-depth analysis. Addressing this point from the Ukrainian perspective is crucial for the sake of both objective reality, facts and transparency.

Ukraine is in its 32nd year of independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A third of a century might serve as enough time to acknowledge both the accomplishments and the drawbacks that society faces.

There is a widely supported uncompromising conclusion to which many scholars like Åslund (2009), Minakov and Rojansky (2015) and more recent assessments such as one presented in the report of 2022 by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance have come in their research. Not a direct quote from any of the mentioned resources, but this conclusion reads as follows: Ukrainian democracy has traversed an extensive journey since its earliest manifestations in the post-1991 era. Even today, in the middle of aggressive and unjustified war, it stands proudly with a thriving civil society. Yet, the country itself, the people and the democracy can be called hostages to the war waged by Russia.

This war is an ongoing socio-economic, humanitarian and demographic crisis that has been felt not only in Ukraine but in many corners of the world. Despite the considerable strides made, Ukraine's democracy

continues to face complexities arising from these persistent issues.

Any war as the period of extremes causes an unknown before level of violence and grievances in society and can be called a crash test for democracy. Considering that Russia first attacked Ukraine as early as in 2014 with the annexation of Crimean Peninsula and subsequent sparking of violent conflict in the eastern Donbas region, the past nine years with two different presidencies might have been enough for the world to recognize the resiliency of democratic society of Ukraine. However, it was the response of both the people and the government to the unprovoked, unjustified - and ultimately unsuccessful - full-scale invasion started by Russia on 24th February of 2022 that continues to serve as the proof of both resiliency and democracy being upheld in Ukraine.

### ***War born challenges for post-war Ukraine***

As IDEA (2022) puts it, democracies are loosely defined as regimes that hold elections that meet minimal standards of meaningfulness, competitiveness, and suffrage. In today's Ukraine martial law is the only impediment to realizing the mentioned definition in practice.

This is part and parcel of the war that in the Ukrainian case has been waged by the aggressive power. For the purposes of our research and being guided by the framework of the conference, the war-born issues and challenges will be diminished from a broad humanitarian and demographic perspective to the constituents of democratic development of Ukraine's civic society post-war.

In order not to limit ourselves to the growing number of ways of how Russia continues to try to destroy Ukraine as a country, society and a sovereign member of the

international community, the focus is on the three aspects of democratic development Ukraine should concentrate on in the post-war period. These are:

1. Transformation of war-time societal mobilization aimed at defying the aggression towards mobilizing the people for grassroots politics and more autonomous local self-governance once the period of post-war reconstruction commences. This involves saving and preserving both vertical and horizontal connections and networks that were created at the time of extremes into civil society building.

In the aftermath of war, grassroots politics can bridge societal divides, channel collective efforts towards reconstruction, and foster a sense of ownership over the democratic process. Similarly, local governance forms a fundamental pillar of democratic transition. By decentralizing power and enhancing local governance capacities, Ukraine can ensure that decision-making processes are closely tied to the people's needs and aspirations. This can enhance transparency, improve service delivery, and promote responsiveness within the political system.

2. Veteran and volunteer movements are to be considered in high regard and serve as a strong institution in society. The challenge will be not letting it disperse into plural political parties that may bring about reputational risks. Ukraine cannot afford losing such a strong entity to political rivalry.

Volunteers serve as catalysts for positive social change, contributing significantly to the rebuilding of democratic institutions, the promotion of social cohesion, and the provision of vital public services. They enhance community resilience, build social capital, and facilitate the participatory processes critical to a thriving democracy.

Moreover, volunteer networks can act as valuable conduits for communication between local communities and higher governmental levels, helping to ensure that policy interventions align with ground realities. An illustrative case study of the significance of volunteer networks in Ukraine is the 'Come Back Alive Foundation'.

3. Integration of the NGO sector into transnational structures with a particular focus on building cooperation with EU countries. This is in line with the euro-atlantic aspirations of Ukraine, enshrined in its Constitution as well as numerous government-issued documents and doctrines such as National Security Strategy of Ukraine aptly subtitled "Security of the country equals human security."

Reaching this goal will entail facilitating partnerships between Ukrainian NGOs and their EU counterparts, enabling knowledge sharing, joint projects, and capacity building initiatives, streamlining administrative procedures for EU funding access, ensuring that Ukrainian NGOs can tap into these resources effectively.

Another aspect that is already in motion is twinning arrangements between Ukrainian and EU cities, enhancing direct cooperation at the local level and involving NGOs in these initiatives. (Smętkowski et al., 2023) Strengthening the legal and institutional framework for NGO operation in Ukraine, aligning it with EU standards and best practices will be of crucial importance on the road from candidacy to membership.

The National Security Strategy (2020) envisions the following building blocks that will enable democratic development of Ukraine's society. These are deterrence (development of defence and security capabilities), resilience (serving as antonym to fragility, ability of each element of the society to adapt and sustainably function facing all types of risks), cooperation (the

development of strategic cooperation with EU, NATO, USA.)

## ***Conclusion***

The international community continues to brace itself with the fact that humanity is entering times of conflict and wars with unexpected players changing their security doctrines, military budgets, and worldview in general.

Ukraine serves as a battleground - literally and metaphorically - as a democracy under attack of aggressive autocracy. The ability of Ukraine to emerge from this phase of Russian-Ukrainian war as a resilient sovereign democracy is of utmost importance not only for Ukrainians, but the whole world that considers itself free and democratic at the core.

Post-war reconstruction should entail preserving volunteer organizations, and safeguarding the veteran movement incorporating it into a resilient and vibrant civil society. Safeguarding these societal institutions is crucial to maintain the momentum of democratization, and to prevent their absorption into party politics where their impact will be diminished. Equally, the integration of Ukraine's NGO sector into transnational structures, particularly those in the EU states, presents a unique opportunity for capacity-building.

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