RESILIENCE AND SOLIDARITY

Ukrainian Civil Society in the Face of War

Stefan Batory Foundation

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Edited by Piotr Kosiewski

STEFAN BATORY FOUNDATION

Stefan Batory Foundation
Sapieżyńska 10a
00-215 Warsaw
tel. (48-22) 536 02 00
fax (48-22) 536 02 20
batory@batory.org.pl
www.batory.org.pl

Translation: Oksana Dizhak (from Ukrainian), Nestor Kaszycki (from Polish and Ukrainian), Kseniya Kharchenko (from Ukrainian)
Edited and proofread by: Dena Angevin and Jerzy Kamecki
Proofread by: Nestor Kaszycki

Graphic design: hopa studio
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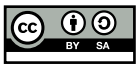

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Now you understand how important the last eight years have been for us – years of true change. How much we have managed to transform over these eight years. The army, society, and the State itself.

Serhiy Zhadan, Facebook post, 10 March 2022, 9:27 AM[1]

1 https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=533681271447561&id=100044170792676&_rdr

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Surprising Ukrainians

Edwin Bendyk

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched before dawn on 24 February 2022, shook the world. Despite warnings from US intelligence services about the inevitability of the attack, even Ukrainians themselves questioned the threat. To this day, public opinion surveys in Ukraine indicate that one of the most serious criticisms voiced by Ukrainians is the state's insufficient preparedness for defence, directed primarily at political elites.

Nevertheless, Ukraine resisted, and the effectiveness of Ukrainian resistance surprised the world even more than the invasion itself. After all, when the world's second-largest army attacks, nothing should be able to stop it. Victorious troops were expected to march down Khreshchatyk after a few days of blitzkrieg and the 'cleansing of Kyiv from drug addicts' who, according to Russian propaganda, formed an illegitimate and 'neo-Nazi' government. This narrative was not only believed by Russians but also by a significant number of politicians and members of the global public, including in democratic countries. Ukraine seemed doomed to collapse.

However, what happened was something that had occurred many times before – a phenomenon perfectly captured by British historian Andrew Wilson in his book *The Ukrainians*, published in Poland in 2002. The original 2000 title is a few words longer and highly significant: *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*. Andrew Wilson explains why he chose this title for his now-classic work: 'primarily because the emergence of an independent Ukrainian state in 1991 came as a huge surprise to diplomatic offices, universities, and stock markets in Western countries – a surprise that the West has not yet fully come to terms with. Especially considering the ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity of contemporary Ukraine, there were many serious reasons to regard this country as an unlikely candidate for sovereign statehood. Nevertheless, a state that no one expected to exist does not cease to be a state just like many others.'[1]

1 A. Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation*, 2000.

The Russian propaganda apparatus and its disinformation efforts have long worked – and continue to work – to prevent the world from accepting Ukraine as a sovereign state, not only in 2000 but also in 2022. The myth of a failed state, incapable of providing public services, utterly corrupt, became part of the common perception of Ukraine even in circles and societies that profess sympathy for Ukraine's aspirations for independent existence. Ukrainians have consistently debunked this myth in their own way – by surprising the world. The Orange Revolution of 2004 was unexpected, and the Euromaidan, which evolved into the Revolution of Dignity, was even more astonishing. In 2022, the resistance against Russian aggression once again defied expectations.

There is no shortage of conspiracy theories attempting to explain the origins of these events as the work of the CIA and other intelligence agencies aiming to pull Ukraine away from its so-called natural cultural and geostrategic environment – the *russkiy mir*, or: the Russian world. However, anyone familiar with Ukraine's history and culture beyond narratives filtered through Russian propaganda knows that the truth is far more interesting and complex. Both Ukraine's independence, declared in 1991, and the subsequent revolutions and defensive war are expressions of a broader process – the transformation and consolidation of Ukrainian society into a modern political entity, organising its collective existence within the institutions of a democratic state. An imperfect state, perhaps, but a democratic one nonetheless, built on the principles of political pluralism and cultural diversity.

The sovereign in Ukraine is not the president or an oligarchy seeking to corrupt the system of power, but the people – a nation ready to launch revolutions when necessary to defend its agency. Presidents Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovych learned this lesson years ago, and Volodymyr Zelenskyy understands it as well. He knows that if he were to accept a resolution to the war and peace terms that lack public approval, any treaty he signs would be meaningless.

Of course, with each passing month of war, social fatigue grows as perceptions of a possible resolution shift, and acceptance of compromise increases. However, what remains unchanged is the conviction that the ultimate decision belongs to society.

One that – contrary to Margaret Thatcher's famous claim that 'there is no such thing as society' – undeniably exists in Ukraine. And it proves its existence not only through revolutionary uprisings but, more importantly, through daily engagement in matters of public importance: supporting the

armed forces, caring for veterans and forcibly displaced persons, fighting corruption and overseeing government structures at both local and national levels, documenting war crimes committed by Russians, protecting cultural heritage, and fostering its development even under wartime conditions.

This social agency, which the Russian invasion has only strengthened, is one of the pillars of Ukraine's resilience – a resilience that has astonished the world. However, as explained by the authors of this collection, it is not the only pillar. While Ukrainian society is capable of independence and self-organisation, it does not form an autarky that exists apart from the state; rather, it functions in active symbiosis with it. A prime example here is the governance system of Suspilne, the public media network, which was reformed after the Revolution of Dignity. Civil society organisations, by law, gained a majority in the supervisory board, ensuring the protection of public media from political influence.

This is just one of the solutions that enable Ukrainian society, together with public institutions, local and national government structures, and even the military, to form what is sometimes referred to as a *horizontal network state*. Of course, we should not be swayed by the magic of words – Ukrainians themselves are well aware, as social research indicates, that their state is far from perfect. The temptation to concentrate power during wartime by the president and his inner circle is not merely a fantasy promoted by Russian propaganda, while corruption remains a real challenge that undermines public trust.

Nevertheless, this imperfect structure, with an empowered society bound by solidarity, has proven resilient enough to withstand aggression from a nominally much stronger adversary. The collection *Resilience and Solidarity: Ukrainian Civil Society in the Face of War* is an attempt to describe this structure and the mechanisms that sustain it – an imperfect system, yet one that has shown a remarkable ability to navigate the most challenging of realities.

War as a Test of State and Social Resilience

Olha Reznikova

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation has been going on for three years now, and the occupation of the Ukrainian Crimea and part of the Donbas – for more than 10 years. Over that time, our State has been subjected to the powerful influence of various hybrid threats. This is a sufficient period to assess the strength and viability of the State and society in extremely difficult conditions. The experience of these years demonstrates that Ukraine has significant potential for resilience, the manifestation of which is now being witnessed by the whole world. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the enemy to devalue or distort the outstanding accomplishments of the Ukrainian State and society, which continue to exist and function effectively not only in peaceful conditions, but also during wartime.

Scientists have concluded that it is impossible to achieve complete resilience and guaranteed protection against all possible threats, while ensuring national resilience is a continuous process with a specific goal.[1] How states and their allies perceive their own resilience

Olha Reznikova, born in 1971, is Head of the National Security Affairs Department at the Centre for Security Studies (National Institute for Strategic Studies). In 1993, she earned a master's degree from Kyiv State University of Economics. In 2022, she defended her doctoral dissertation on the development of Ukraine's currency regulation system at the Institute of Financial Research under the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine. From 1993 to 2001, she worked as an economist and senior economist at the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine. Between 2001 and 2009, she served as an expert and head of department at the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, where she prepared analytical briefs and reports for the President on financial security issues. From 2009 to 2019, she worked at Naftogaz of Ukraine.
Since 2010, she has been working at the National Institute for Strategic Studies, focusing on national security issues, risk assessment, strategic planning, and improving Ukraine's national security

1 P. Bourbeau, 'Resiliencism: premises and promises in securitisation research,' *Resilience* 1:1 (2013), pp. 3–17; D. Chandler, 'Resilience and human security: The post-interventionist paradigm,' *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 3 (2012), pp. 213–229.

system. However, one of Olha Reznikova's primary research interests is the concept of national resilience, which has become particularly relevant in the context of Russia's ongoing aggression since 2014. In 2012 and 2015, Olha Reznikova participated in training programmes at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Germany.

may not correspond to their real resilience, which is more accurately revealed during times of crisis. In peacetime, it is possible to assess the approximate potential of resilience within the state and its governing bodies, as well as their capabilities, ability to effectively respond to certain threats and interact with each other. However, it is more difficult to reliably measure potential social resilience, since this is largely hidden and mainly revealed during crisis situations.[2]

The war in Ukraine has called into question some theoretical conclusions and assumptions about methods for assessing national resilience, ways of ensuring it, as well as the priority of measures recommended to achieve this by scientists, as well as international organisations and national governments. One question is whether having an effective defence and civil protection system, well-established logistics in the fields of energy, water and food supply, as well as a reliable transport system, cyber defence and healthcare system, is enough to render a state resilient. Certainly, these and other systems and processes play a significant role in ensuring vital functions during a crisis period. However, societal resilience, the motivation and ability of people to adapt to difficult conditions, and effectively interact with public authorities to overcome the threat and its consequences are equally important. This has been confirmed by the experience of Ukraine.

The peculiarity of the ongoing war in Ukraine is that the aggressor is a state with much greater military and economic potential, which possesses nuclear weapons and is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Our state was able to withstand and survive the initial days of the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation solely due to its inherent resilience. At the same time, the ongoing fight against overwhelming enemy forces requires support from partner states and allies. Under such conditions, effective external assistance is an important factor in strengthening national resilience and defence capabilities. It is clear that this situation also brings certain risks. In particular, unbalanced interstate relations can lead to dependence by one state on others. In the case of Ukraine, its ability to effectively defend itself

2 M. Ungar (Ed.), *Multisystemic Resilience: Adaptation and Transformation in Contexts of Change* (New York, 2021); O. Reznikova, O. Korniievskyi, 'Resilience of the Ukrainian society in wartime: components and influencing factors,' *Eastern Journal of European Studies* 15, no. 1 (2024), pp. 113–133.

against the aggressor largely depends on the complete and timely execution of obligations by partner states, as well as the conditions they put forward for the use of the military assistance they provide.

In general, war reveals the true resilience of states, their societies, as well as international relations, both in the context of partnerships and the international security system as a whole. Let us analyse various elements of resilience in more detail based on the example of the Ukrainian case.

The resilience of the Ukrainian State is ensured by the credibility of state institutions, the effective organisation of systemic relations and legislation regulating procedures for actions under normal conditions, as well as during emergencies and wartime. Ukraine's ability to ensure continuous governance was clearly demonstrated in 2014, when President Viktor Yanukovych and a number of his ministers fled the country. The legal succession mechanisms provided for by legislation worked effectively and made it possible to organise and hold re-elections of the President and the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine within a short period of time, as well as restart the government and ensure its uninterrupted functioning. Another example was the death of the Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, his first deputy and a number of other representatives of this institution in a plane crash in 2023. This event also did not halt the work of this ministry, which is so key to the war effort, because the relevant legal mechanisms guarantee the continuity of government.

It should be noted that at the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the occupation of Crimea and part of the Donbas, the Ukrainian State was significantly weakened as a result of subversive activities carried out by the former leadership led by President V. Yanukovych as well as lacked the strong support from partner states and their allies that was needed to mount an effective military and diplomatic defence against the aggressor. In the latter case, the situation was significantly aggravated by the influence of special information operations carried out by Russian special services aimed at discrediting Ukraine as a reliable partner in the international arena, which was resonated in the political circles of many Western countries.

As of 24 February 2022, the capabilities of the security and defence sector of Ukraine were significantly strengthened. This was facilitated by reforms and trainings that were held at that time with the participation of partner countries and NATO representatives. This proves the adaptability of the Ukrainian State and its ability to implement progressive transformations, which are important characteristics of national resilience. Also during this period,

Ukraine's formal and informal international relations were developed and professional networks were formed, which have played an important role in strengthening national resilience during the war. One vulnerability of the Ukrainian State at the time of the invasion by the Russian Federation was the lack of modern weapons and military equipment, primarily the air defence systems that were necessary to confront a powerful aggressor as well as protect the population and critical state infrastructure.

It is difficult to imagine that any modern state could independently withstand the large-scale threats, cascading effects, as well as regional and global impacts that Ukraine is currently facing. Moreover, as the war has revealed, international law and the international security system no longer guarantee international justice or security.

The effective functioning of the Ukrainian State under conditions of war, and its ability to ensure the uninterrupted performance of essential functions and services demonstrates Ukraine's resilience and dispels myths about the incapacity of our state, its artificial origins and other nonsense that Russian propaganda as well as special services were actively and professionally promoting worldwide prior to 24 February 2022 and which were largely aimed at preventing Ukraine from joining the EU and NATO. Circulation of distorted information about Ukraine within the political and expert circles of many states has led to a significant underestimation of the resilience of the Ukrainian State and society and their ability to resist the aggressor. And does this fact not cast doubt on similar assessments of Ukraine's non-compliance with the criteria for membership in the EU and NATO, which were actively voiced by some experts until 2022? After all, in the European Commission Report on Ukraine within the framework of the Enlargement Package in 2023, EU representatives praised Ukraine's progress towards European integration.[3] It should be noted that such positive assessments were earned against the background of significant destruction and loss of economic and human potential, expansion of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and the impossibility of holding regular presidential elections during wartime. This testifies in favour of two hypotheses: the condition and level of development of Ukraine before the war was significantly underestimated and/or the transformational potential of its resilience was not taken into account,

3 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy 2023. Ukraine 2023 Report. European Commission, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/bb61ea6d-dda6-4117-9347-a7191ecefc3f_en?filename=SWD_2023_699%20Ukraine%20report.pdf (access here and in further footnotes 10 February 2025).

namely the ability of Ukraine to transform negative events into positive results and develop.

During the war, some functions of the state have been consciously assumed by Ukrainian civil society. First and foremost, these efforts are aimed at providing support to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as well as certain social services to internally displaced persons, wounded military personnel and civilians, as well as other categories of the population. Currently, there are a significant number of community centres in different regions of Ukraine that offer physical and mental rehabilitation services for war victims. The current importance of these public services can be assessed based on the following indicators. According to the World Health Organization, almost 10 million Ukrainians may suffer from various mental health disorders as a result of the war (from anxiety and stress to more severe conditions).[4] The corresponding estimates by Ukrainian specialists are significantly higher. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, from the beginning of the war until August 2024, more than 11 500 civilians were killed and more than 23 600 people were injured in Ukraine.[5] At the same time, UN experts recognise that the real numbers may be much higher.

Other important activities carried out by volunteers and public organisations include the provision of various types of assistance to internally displaced persons, people with limited mobility, the elderly, children, war veterans, etc. Human rights organisations are actively involved in documenting war crimes and human rights violations committed by the Russian Federation during the war, in particular, the ZMINA Human Rights Centre, and NGOs such as the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group and the Crimean Human Rights Protection Group, etc. There are a number of public organisations and programmes, including Repair Together, the NGO Dobrobat, and the National Programme for Youth Involvement in the Restoration of Ukraine Recovery:UA, that provide significant assistance to state and local authorities during the evacuation of civilian populations from combat zones.

As a rule, relevant public initiatives are supported by the state and local authorities of Ukraine. A striking example is the creation of 'invincibility

4 'One in four Ukrainians at risk of mental disorder due to conflict – WHO.' Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/one-four-ukrainians-risk-mental-disorder-due-conflict-who-2022-12-20/.

5 'Number of civilian casualties in Ukraine during Russia's invasion verified by OHCHR from 24 February 2022 to 31 July 2024,' https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293492/ukraine-war-casualties/.

points'[6] that exist in certain public spaces and are designed to provide the population with access to electricity and the internet during a blackout. Other forms of state support for public initiatives in times of war have also become widespread. In particular, tax incentives for volunteering were introduced. To this end, the State Tax Service of Ukraine established a register of volunteers.

Stimulation of economic activity during wartime is implemented through a number of state programmes for business relocation, tax incentives for certain types of activities, preferential loans for energy saving projects, etc. This has contributed to the maintainance of relatively high levels of business activity in Ukraine since the beginning of the war. The significant increase in the state budget deficit due to substantial growth in defence spending was partially offset by considerable charitable contributions from Ukrainian enterprises and individual donors. External financial assistance has also become an essential factor in the formation of Ukraine's financial resilience. In general, the economic and financial resilience of our state during wartime deserves special study.

The experience of the Come Back Alive Foundation, established in 2014, is of great interest. Its main goal is to support the defence forces of Ukraine in their fight against the aggressor. This charitable organisation was the first non-governmental organisation in Ukraine that received permission to purchase and import military and dual-use goods.[7] According to the Come Back Alive Foundation, the organisation has already purchased a significant amount of weapons and military equipment for defensive units, as well as trained more than 10,000 highly qualified military specialists, such as mine clearance specialists, snipers, operators of unmanned aerial vehicles and infantry weapons, first aid responders,[8] etc. The effectiveness of this foundation has been recognised by many cooperating public authorities.

The activities undertaken by public organisations and journalists to expose fake news and disinformation deserve special attention due to the fact that since the beginning of the full-scale war, the Russian Federation has intensified special information operations in order to increase psychological pressure on Ukrainians. Organisations such as StopFake and Detector Media verify the accuracy of the information provided by a particular information

6 In Ukrainian 'Punkt nezlamnosti', an initiative by Ukrainian authorities to provide public access to heat, water, electricity, mobile communications, etc. launched in November 2022.

7 Goods with both civilian and military applications, e.g. certain types of drones.

8 In Ukraine, this term refers to paramedics working in combat conditions.

source and publish their findings in a clear and accessible format for the population. Information hygiene has become a common core within educational programmes in many educational institutions of Ukraine. It should be noted that the high overall level of education and culture of the population, the availability and accessibility of media and other sources of information, critical thinking, and the experience gained in combating disinformation are safeguards that significantly weaken the influence of destructive information on Ukrainian society and shape resistance to its effects.

In general, the formation of a powerful volunteer movement is the first manifestation of societal resilience in the form of self-organisation, mobilisation and self-management of society in times of crisis. This is confirmed by the experience of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, when there was a surge in such activity. Moreover, not only citizens and public organisations are involved in charitable activities, but also business representatives. From a scientific point of view, this indicates the development and credibility of systemic ties between the state, society and business, which are important components of national resilience.[9] When the priorities of state policy must be shifted to defence and national security, a proactive civil society helps to strengthen those areas of public activity that are temporarily not in the state spotlight, or those that require additional resources (in particular, social policy, culture, education).

So what are the factors that form societal resilience and motivate people to protect and support their state despite many losses, and sometimes even loss of life? Studies show that an important role in these processes is played by an established civic and local identity, social cohesion, the absence of social conflicts, the willingness to cooperate with the state, the involvement of the population in ensuring sustainable and safe social development as well as solving vital problems of various social groups, trust in governmental and civil society institutions, and the formation of reliable social capital, etc.[10]

Ukrainian civic identity is a proven construct that has only strengthened over the years. According to a sociological survey conducted by the Razumkov Centre in June 2024, 91% of Ukrainian citizens under study are proud to be Ukrainians. In 2015, the number amounted to 68%, in 2010 – 62%, in

9 M. Pelling and C. High, 'Understanding adaptation: what can social capital offer assessments of adaptive capacity?' *Global Environmental Change*, 15, no. 4 (2005), pp. 308–319; M. Keck and P. Sakdapolrak, 'What is social resilience? Lessons learned and ways forward,' *Erdkunde* 67, no. 1 (2013), pp. 5–19.

10 O. Reznikova, O. Korniievskyi, 'Resilience of the Ukrainian society in wartime: components and influencing factors,' *Eastern Journal of European Studies* 15, no. 1 (2024), pp. 113–133.

2000 – 62%. The majority of Ukrainian citizens share democratic values: 61% of respondents believe that democracy is the most desirable type of government for Ukraine; 50.5% agreed that rule by the people is more important for our country than order (in the strict sense of the word); when choosing between freedom and material wealth, 47% of respondents prefer freedom (and only 24% material wealth). At the same time, support for democratic values is stronger than in 2021, that is, before the outbreak of the full-scale war.[11] These data highlight the beliefs and values that unite Ukrainian society, which have not only remained unchanged, but have been reinforced during wartime.

In general, there are strong links between manifestations of national culture and resilience. On the one hand, cultural imperatives, such as shared aspirations for freedom, justice, spiritual and socio-political values, shape societal unity, and therefore strengthen national resilience. On the other hand, the resilience of society and political institutions largely determines the strategic culture of the state and the dominant pattern of its military and political behaviour.[12] In the case of Ukraine, it was a powerful manifestation of societal resilience during wartime that prompted a shift in military and political behaviour by the state from passive to defensive, which makes it possible to address threats more actively not only during the response stage, but also at the prevention stage, and rely mainly on one's own forces. The extremely negative experience of Ukraine with respect to external security guarantees under the Budapest Memorandum[13] also contributed to a revision of the state's approaches to ensuring national security in favour of strengthening national resilience.

Special attention should be paid to the preparedness of the population and communities to respond to various threats as an element of societal resilience. This involves the dissemination of knowledge among inhabitants about the nature and character of threats, as well as how to respond when they occur, as well as the acquisition of appropriate skills in exercise and

11 Razumkov Center, 'Identity of Ukrainian Citizens: Trends of Change (June 2024),' https://razumkov.org.ua/en/sociology/press-releases/the-identity-of-ukraine-s-citizens-trends-of-change-june-2024.

12 F.L. Jones, Strategic thinking and culture: a framework for analysis. In Bartholomees J.B. (ed.) U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Issues. Strategic Studies Institute (US Army War College, 2012), pp. 287–305.

13 The Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances is an international agreement that was signed in December 1994 and intended to guarantee Ukraine's sovereignty and integrity. The signatories – the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom and Ukraine – agreed to transfer nuclear weapons that had been stationed in the former Soviet republic during Soviet times to Russia as one of the conditions of the agreement.

training. Previous experience in dealing with crisis situations increases people's readiness to respond to threats and the effectiveness of their actions.

It is worth noting that the Ukrainian people have faced many crises of various origins. The Holodomor (famine) of 1932–1933, the man-made disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986, the collapse of the USSR, the First and Second World Wars, the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid aggression and the full-scale invasion of Russia are only a few notable examples. This experience and historical memory are components of Ukraine's resilience, which has deep roots and distinguishes our country from others.

This experience has shaped the character traits of Ukrainians, such as adaptability to moments of crisis and creativity. These qualities came in handy during the severe energy crises and blackouts caused by the Russian army's deliberate destruction of Ukraine's critical civilian energy infrastructure. Ukrainians have learned to synchronise their daily routines with blackout schedules, and have reduced their energy dependence by purchasing and installing alternative power sources (generators, mobile charging stations, power banks, etc.).

It is easier to weather the temporary difficulties and complex problems caused by war when people are united by common values and ideas. According to D. Brown and J. Kulig, people are resilient if they are together.[14] A significant number of Ukrainians who travelled abroad at the beginning of the war in search of temporary asylum have already returned home, despite difficult living conditions in Ukraine and the constant bombing by the Russian army. Currently, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of people who are still abroad and who have returned to Ukraine.

Electronic means of communication have become an important tool for strengthening horizontal ties in society and forming communities in times of war. This allows family members who have been separated by the war to keep in touch, and facilitates the creation of virtual groups of citizens who were forced to leave their homes and move to safer regions, as well as homeowners' communities, professional networks, psychological support groups, etc. It should be borne in mind that in the face of regular enemy drone and missile attacks as well as forced confinement in shelters, electronic means of communication enable the continuity of business processes, governance and educational process, etc.

14 D. Brown and J. Kulig, 'The concept of resiliency: Theoretical lessons from community research,' *Health and Canadian Society* 4 (1996/97), pp. 29–52.

A new challenge for Ukraine was the need to ensure the effective reintegration of veterans in civil life and social activities. The state has already created favourable conditions for veterans to enrol in vocational training and retraining, start their own businesses, as well as engage in social entrepreneurship and professional adaptation, etc. The role of veteran organisations in public life is gradually increasing. There is a public demand for the engagement of veterans in civic education and national-patriotic education. It should be noted that in terms of veteran support, the most active interaction is taking place between the state, represented by the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine, local authorities, civil society institutions and international organisations. Establishing such extensive systemic relations is extremely important given the fact that the reintergration of veterans after the war is an issue that will only increase in scale.

A significant factor of societal resilience is trust in authorities as well as how state and social leaders behave during times of crisis. According to the sociological survey of the Razumkov Centre, in 2024 the highest levels of public trust were recorded in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (trusted by 90% of respondents), volunteer organisations (81%), volunteer battalions (80%), the State Emergency Service (79%), the National Guard of Ukraine (75%), the State Border Guard Service (71%) and the Church (63%). At the same time, the highest indicators of public trust in most institutions of state power in Ukraine for the entire period of observation were recorded in the second half of 2022.[15] This indicates that the behaviour of state leaders during the war, especially the most difficult initial days, fully met public expectations as well as motivated people to mobilise and unite to protect their state from the aggressor.

The gradual deterioration in citizen well-being and their expectations for the future, which is currently being observed, indicates the accumulation of war fatigue. This is an expected, albeit alarming signal in the context of the war of attrition imposed on Ukraine and the world by the current leadership of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, according to a sociological survey conducted in June 2024, 80% of respondents believe in Ukraine's future victory.[16]

15 Razumkov Centre, *Assessment of the Situation in the Country, Trust in Social Institutions, Politicians, Officials and Public Figures, Attitude to Elections, Faith in Victory (June 2024)*, https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-sytuatsii-v-kraini-dovira-do-sotsialnykh-instytutiv-politykiv-posadovtsiv-ta-gromadskykh-diiachiv-stavlennia-do-vyboriv-vira-v-peremogu-cherven-2024r.

16 Ibid.

When considering victory against an adversary that has a significant advantage in human, military, and economic power, it is important to remember that national resilience is one of many success factors, but not the only one. In the context of the ongoing war, leading international security organisations, in particular the UN, including the Security Council, the Red Cross, as well as the OSCE and the IAEA, failed to demonstrate their effectiveness, resilience and ability to transform. Is the verbal expression of 'deep concern' or even 'determination' really worth the enormous budgets allocated for the maintenance of these organisations and their bureaucracies? It is widely known that the International Criminal Court in The Hague issued a warrant for the arrest of Russian President Vladimir Putin. At the same time, some states that have ratified the Rome Statute defiantly refuse to comply with this decision (e.g. Mongolia). The inability of leading international organisations to influence the development of the situation within the areas of their competence, primarily international security and the protection of human rights, as well as the ineffectiveness of international law are cause for considerable concern, to say the least.

At the same time, it should be borne in mind that aggressor states can also strengthen their resilience. Thus, the Russian Federation has demonstrated adaptability to the international sanctions regime as well as is developing military and economic ties with other states that have been living under sanctions for a long time (Iran, the DPRK), and certain other states. Against this background, possible strengthening of international alliances involving Russia, such as BRICS, which Turkey recently expressed its intention to join, is an issue that warrants attention. How will the potential participation of a NATO Member State in such an alliance affect its resilience? How stable is NATO today, in the context of a full-scale war in a neighbouring European State, if some members of the alliance cannot shoot down drones and missiles launched by the Russian Federation over *their* territory that 'accidentally' violate their air space? In contrast, Belarus does this without hesitation.

As has already been mentioned, Ukrainian resilience in the face of a full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation largely depends on the resilience of partners and relations with them. The weakening of this resilience will also affect Ukraine, as well as result in further loss of life and destruction among Ukrainians. Such an outcome is unlikely to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, which were supported by all Western countries.

In summary, the fact that Ukraine as an independent state continues to exist and function despite difficult conditions, including a full-scale war, crises of

different origins, etc. attests to the significant resilience potential inherent in its state institutions and mechanisms, as well as within its society. This is first and foremost a question of sufficient legal and institutional development in the field of public administration and ensuring national security and defence, the peculiarities of the national mentality, which are rooted in the desire for freedom and justice, a high overall level of education and culture, as well as the prevalence and accessibility of the media and other sources of information, etc.

In the midst of war, Ukraine has become an example of resilience, courage, and determination in the fight against the aggressor state in upholding democratic values as well as the internationally recognised right to self-defence and protection of national interests. By supporting Ukraine, the EU and NATO recognise that we share common democratic values that are worth defending. Times of crisis reveal the real resilience of states, their societies, unions and ties. Leading international organisations, primarily the UN, have not passed the test posed by the war in Ukraine. Only time and the way in which the war unleashed by Russia ends will tell us how resilient Ukraine's partners, including NATO and the EU, really are.

This is an Existential Struggle for Us

Interview with Hanna Hopko

Looking at your biography, one could say that you started with environmental issues, then moved into the civic sector, transitioned into politics, and are now back in civic activism. This is a very dynamic life, which also reflects what has been happening in Ukraine over the years. How has Russia's full-scale invasion changed your life, society, and non-governmental organisations like the one you lead?

In reality, Russia's aggression against Ukraine began in 2014, and even before that, we saw signs of hybrid warfare – in the form of a trade blockade in 2013 and Russian infiltration within the country through the information space, politics, and the church. That is why we cannot speak of the war as having started only in 2022. If we take the restoration of Ukrainian statehood after 1991 as a point of reference, we can see that Russian aggression has been ongoing – since the invasion of Crimea in 2014 – for more than 10 years.

And if in 2014 it was only the Russian Federation, over the past decade we have witnessed the institutionalisation of authoritarian regimes, forming an axis of evil. At the beginning of Russia's aggression in 2014, many were even afraid to use the word 'war', with some referring to it as a civil conflict. It was difficult at the time to challenge and correct

Hanna Hopko, social and political activist and chair of the board at the National Interests Advocacy Network ANTS, was born in 1982 in Lviv Oblast. In 2004, she earned a master's degree from the Faculty of Journalism at Ivan Franko National University of Lviv. She worked in radio and television while also being active in civil society organisations, developing an interest in environmental issues. In 2009, she defended her doctoral dissertation at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv: *Environmental Journalism: A Worldview Aspect (based on Ukrainian and foreign publications from 1992 to 2008).*
In 2009, she became the coordinator of a national coalition of organisations and initiatives advocating for the reduction of tobacco use, lobbying for the adoption of five anti-tobacco laws. In 2014, she was elected to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine from the list of the Samopomich party (Self Reliance). In parliament, she served as chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. She was the author and co-author of numerous laws, including those on restoring tax benefits for non-governmental organisations, introducing transparent mechanisms for party financing, providing online

public access to property, land and transport registers, as well as banning propaganda of communist and Nazi regimes. In 2017, she was among the initiators of a law requiring that 75% of national television programmes and 50% of regional ones be conducted in the Ukrainian language. In 2019, she decided not to participate in parliamentary elections and focused on civic activities. That same year, she co-founded the National Interests Advocacy Network ANTS, aimed at formulating a vision for Ukraine's development until 2030, including preparations for NATO and EU membership.
After Russia's full-scale aggression, Hanna Hopko focused on advocating for international support for Ukraine, including the transfer of Western tanks, F-16 fighter jets and ATACMS missiles, as well as the imposition of sanctions against Russia. Most of these initiatives are carried out within the framework of the ANTS organisation, which she leads.

this narrative. Only the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014 and the deaths of 298 passengers in a terrorist attack helped open the eyes of many world capitals, leading them to recognise the conflict as a war.

Moreover, since 2014, we have witnessed attempts to pressure Ukraine into political and diplomatic settlements primarily aimed at appeasing the aggressor. We remember the Minsk agreements, signed on 5 September 2014 and 12 February 2015, at a time when the West was not ready to provide weapons to Ukraine.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a consequence of the Kremlin's previous actions, following the same strategy seen in Moldova, Georgia, and beyond. There was no luxury of staying on the sidelines – everyone had to be part of Ukraine's victory, in which I firmly believe. The full-scale invasion became an attempted genocide, and we are now campaigning for international legal recognition of Russia's aggression as genocide. Russia has explicitly stated that its goal is the destruction of Ukrainians, making this a fight for our survival.

When Crimea was annexed and the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were invaded, it felt as if the war was far away, even though I frequently travelled to Donbas. After the full-scale invasion, I 'celebrated' my 40th birthday by travelling from Warsaw to Rzeszów for a meeting with Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

This entire period has been a marathon of marathons. I remember the disappointment with Western partners, from whom we expected a stronger stance, yet they remained under the influence of Russian propaganda, outdated views of their Sovietologists, so-called Russia experts, and so on.

Living in Warsaw for nearly a year, where it was much easier to travel to various capitals for advocacy work, I still felt a deep desire to return home.

There is nowhere else I want to live – only here, in Ukraine – because this is where my grandparents' graves are. This is our land, where we are experiencing a historic moment, carrying the burden of awareness that we must win this war. This war must be won as a historic war, as a victory of truth and justice. It is time to finally end a struggle that has lasted for centuries.

In 2021, our organisation, ANTS (National Interests Defense Network),[1] launched a campaign marking 300 years since Peter the Great changed the name of Muscovy. We aimed to explain that Russian imperial policy – from the Tsardom of Moscow through the Soviet Union to the present day – has always been about appropriating Ukrainian history to legitimise itself and create a false sense of continuity spanning a thousand years. The goal was to falsely establish a connection between Rus and Russia. In reality, this is not just about historical appropriation but also about territorial occupation and genocide. This genocidal practice is not exclusive to Ukraine, but Ukraine has always been seen as the strongest, with the greatest will to resist. Over these years, we have walked a difficult path, and though there is fatigue, it has only made us stronger.

We are now speaking at the ANTS headquarters. What are the main areas of activity of your organisation? From the information on your website, it is clear that they are quite diverse. What connects them?

In 1999, I joined an environmental NGO in Lviv. This understanding of harmony between humans and nature is also an essential part of the Ukrainian character. We describe the land as our mother. Ukrainians have a deeply caring attitude toward nature, something that could not be eradicated – despite the Soviet Union and despite Michurin's theories, which claimed that we should not wait for nature's mercy but take control of it by force. This Soviet approach failed, not only because Ukrainians are a nation of farmers, but also because we are a nation of cosmonauts, rocket engineers, and physicists.

From my experience, I see how crucial the role of civil society has been. We want to see active citizens. During the Revolution on Granite (1990), the Orange Revolution (2004), and the Revolution of Dignity (2013), it was the people who stood up to defend the state. And now, many say: I am defending my country because the state has not given us everything we need, and institutions do not function as they should.

1 See ANTS, available at: https://ants.org.ua/ (English version: https://ants.org.ua/en/home-2/) (accessed here and in further footnotes 10 February 2025) (editor's note).

That is why one of ANTS' key missions is to build a strong state based on the rule of law and robust institutions. It is not just about citizens constantly having to defend their country from an external enemy and from the fifth column of corrupt officials within. We must reach a point where we have a strong middle class of professionals as well as an independent legislative, executive, and local government. One of ANTS' strategic priorities is supporting local governance. When we were in parliament, we did a lot to promote decentralisation reform.

ANTS is now five years old, and, as expected, Russia's aggression has forced us to adjust our work. That is why, in March 2022, together with ANTS, we established the International Centre for Ukraine's Victory in Warsaw. But if you look at ANTS, it operates like an ant colony – a horizontal network, which is also one of Ukraine's greatest strengths. This is evident in territorial defence forces and volunteers who stepped up during the COVID-19 pandemic. This grassroots resilience is something that even the enemy cannot comprehend, yet it remains one of Ukraine's greatest strengths.

For ANTS, international priorities are clear – Ukraine's membership in the European Union and NATO – and our projects are built around these goals. We are preparing young people, the future negotiators for both the EU and NATO. In 2024, we held our fourth round of recruitment for the NATO Youth Parliamentary Assembly. Over the past four years, we have trained around 600 young Ukrainians, who have completed a full NATO course. This is an investment in the youth who will be part of the Euro-Atlantic community.

Beyond this, we focus on reforms such as natural resource management and waste control, which are directly linked to European integration. In other words, Ukraine is returning to the European family of nations – where it belonged when Yaroslav the Wise married off his daughters to strengthen Ukraine through alliances. Today, we have no kings or queens, but Ukraine's true crown lies in its defence forces and innovations. That is why our mission is to stay on this path.

Strengthening Ukraine's resilience through regional development is crucial, particularly by supporting hromadas.[2] After the full-scale invasion, we have worked to assist in various ways – from delivering electric generators to developing roadmaps for reconstruction and building relationships. We have taken local government leaders to Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, and Poland to establish direct communication channels. The goal is to cultivate

2 Hromada – a basic unit of administrative division in Ukraine, similar to a municipality.

and prepare future Ukrainian elites. One of our key tasks is training young people as well as those who want to learn, whether they are veterans or volunteers.

Our vision, from citizen resilience to a state of gratitude, is built on strategic pillars, with Ukraine's victory as the unifying force. But victory is not just about defeating the enemy – it also requires internal transformation within Ukraine. We have moved away from the post-Soviet mentality and the oligarchic, clan-based system that developed under President Leonid Kuchma. Through revolutions and Maidans, we have gradually dismantled this system, and now we must complete the transformation. We are preparing elites who will take part in the next parliamentary and local elections, ensuring that Ukraine's future leadership is ready for the challenges ahead.

We will return to the question of society later, but now I would like to ask about the civic sector. What is your assessment of its current state? How much has the war impacted this sector? Is there still room for organisations that were once well-known and active? Or has the war shifted priorities to the extent that the civic sector itself may need to redefine its role and activities?

There are various studies on this topic. One way to assess the state of civil society is by looking at civil society sustainability indicators, which measure how well the sector is developing, the emergence of new actors, and the introduction of new topics.

During the war, many advocacy tools that we previously relied on have been suspended. Street protests are no longer an option. We also limit criticism to avoid playing into Russian propaganda. However, for our National Interests Defense Network, it has always been essential to build something like a national team – a group of parliamentarians who understand that they do not represent a party as a corporation, but rather the interests of the people who elected them. The same principle applies to the government. Regardless of who the prime minister or other top officials are, they must recognise and prioritise the interests of the state.

That is why the role of civil society is so crucial. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, I have visited 29 countries on a mission to lobby for Ukraine's interests. In some capitals, such as Washington, I have been seven times; in Canada twice; in Taiwan twice; and also in Japan. Ukraine cannot defeat the axis of evil alone – China, Iran, and North Korea are actively

helping Russia. We must explain to the world why Ukraine's victory is geopolitically crucial.

The current war is also a war of resources. We understand that Russia has an advantage in this area, which is why we launched the *Make Russia Pay* campaign, advocating for the confiscation of Russian assets. We must secure resource sustainability – it is absolutely essential.

Since the invasion, we have also witnessed a significant shift in awareness in the West. At first, people said it was merely an aggression against Ukraine – now, they acknowledge it as a war in Europe. However, it is still not fully perceived as *Europe's* war, and Europe must take greater responsibility.

On the other hand, we see all the red lines that the aggressor state has crossed, and if there is no punishment, China may follow the same path in the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait. Our victory is critical for international law, the respect for territorial integrity, and sovereignty. Moreover, we constantly need new resources and must keep reminding the world about our war, as new conflicts continue to emerge on the global map.

We see how chaotic the security landscape is, how the BRICS group of developing countries is evolving, with new states joining. Russia and China are both attempting to diplomatically colonise new nations, and an intense struggle is unfolding. That is why I have not only travelled to transatlantic countries – it is extremely important to explain that Russia's aggression is an example of a colonial war. I also use my previous experience as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, where I had many contacts, to help Ukraine win.

Regarding security issues, the ANTS network has been involved, alongside maritime law experts, in promoting the adoption of Ukraine's maritime security strategy. This is crucial, as one of the aggressor's objectives has been to cut Ukraine off from the sea. This began with the *Novorossiya* project in 2014, when, after occupying Donetsk and Luhansk, Russia also attempted to take Odesa. The sea is vital for both Ukraine and the world, particularly due to grain exports. At the same time, the team in Ukraine is engaged in ongoing reforms that will bring our country closer to membership in the European Union and NATO. These are people working with *hromadas* on projects, reconstruction plans, energy efficiency, and organising various training sessions – from psychological support to application guidance. We support new non-governmental organisations and help register new initiatives in different regions because fresh blood is needed. There are many volunteers,

but not everyone wants to establish an organisation, manage accounting, or handle administrative matters.

Many people are collecting donations and helping the wounded. In one of our projects, we take young people who aspire to become diplomats to Brussels and ask them to take injured soldiers under their care. At the same time, through the Solidarity Economy initiative, we support businesses that remained in Ukraine during the war and continue to operate. We strive to ensure that their products, such as blueberries, reach hospitals. Our goal is to build relationships between soldiers who have fought and been wounded, young people who aim to lead the country, and entrepreneurs who are working for Ukraine. Our task is to create these connections and break people out of their isolated bubbles. This is not easy either.

Returning to the question of society, what is your assessment of the changes that have taken place over the past 20 years, since the Orange Revolution in 2004? Of course, even earlier, there were many significant events in shaping Ukrainian society, such as the Revolution on Granite in 1990, which has already been mentioned. How important are these changes, and what has happened to Ukrainian society as a result?

In reality, the past 20 years represent an entire generation. We are talking about people born in an independent, free Ukraine – those who have no experience of communist enslavement and who follow a completely different philosophy of life. For this generation, freedom has become almost a religion. The most dedicated among them went to defend Ukraine without hesitation. Sadly, many have fallen, like the legendary commander Da Vinci[3] or Roman Ratushnyi, an activist and journalist who fought against illegal construction in Kyiv's green zones. Not far from here is the Shevchenko Museum.[4] Just inside the entrance, there is a portrait of Ratushnyi, who deeply admired Shevchenko. This generation is nationally conscious. For them, patriotism is a profession – not just empty rhetoric, as many politicians have misused it since independence.

This generation has played a key role in Ukraine's transformations over the past 20 years – whether by resisting Russia's attempts during the Orange

3 Dmytro Kotsiubailo – volunteer fighter since 2014 and Hero of Ukraine, killed in combat near Bakhmut on 7 March 2023 at the age of 27.

4 Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861) – Ukrainian poet, writer, artist, public and political figure, folklorist, and ethnographer. Arguably the most prominent figure in Ukraine's history.

Revolution or later during the Revolution of Dignity. Many from this generation have paid with their lives.

Often, while traveling across Ukraine or returning from business trips abroad, I see how our cemeteries are filling with fresh graves. When you see many flags, you realise that behind those flags waving over the graves are would-be parliamentarians, ministers – people who could have done so much for their country. We understand the immense price Ukraine is paying right now.

For ANTS, one of the most important tasks is preserving human capital. It is essential to honour true heroes so that their stories can educate the younger generation. This aggression should make us realise that we cannot afford to waste this opportunity.

The concept of gratitude, which characterises strong nations, is very important to us. When you build a state with gratitude toward the families of those who were killed or wounded, you understand that this state must develop a clear policy for veterans. Reconstruction is not just about investors wanting to build new cities from scratch. It is about uniting people around a vision that ensures justice.

This is not an easy task – there is a lot of trauma, many cases of post-traumatic stress disorder, and a great deal of pain. And this must be met with love. It must be remembered while also finding solutions that will serve as the foundation not only for the return of many thoughtful Ukrainians but also for something that lies deep within us all.

In reality, this is an incredibly difficult task because every day we receive horrific news. Sometimes, I cannot even imagine when the war will end, and when we will truly grasp how many people we have lost, such as Inna Kuznetsova, who led Radio Svoboda[5] – an incredible, extraordinary woman. After five years of working in parliament, I joined the Institute of Journalism at Hrinchenko University. I used to take my students, who were twenty years younger than me, to Radio Svoboda so that Inna could tell them what journalism was like in the Soviet Union, what the Iron Curtain was, and so on.

In September 2023, Ihor Kozlovskyi passed away – a historian and philosopher of extraordinary depth, who spent 700 days in prison in Donetsk Oblast.

5 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty – American government-funded media organisation that broadcasts news and analysis in 27 languages to 23 countries across Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_Free_Europe/Radio_Liberty.

A man who spoke about what he endured in Russian torture chambers, he was an example of immense strength through love and deeply rooted Christian values. Despite 700 days of captivity, he survived and returned with an overwhelming breath of pure love.

That is why this is so important – and ANTS is engaged in this as well, for example, through the *Charisma* project. These are stories of people, their lives, and their examples, which are significant for Ukraine. These people are entrepreneurs, innovators, and philosophers – the ones shaping modern Ukraine. Our task is to show their stories to our people.

You said that you cannot imagine living outside Ukraine during such a difficult time. But many Ukrainians have been forced to flee the war. There is a problem of trust – or rather, a lack of trust in the state…

What matters most are the changes taking place within Ukraine. This is exactly what we are striving to achieve – to cleanse Ukraine of those who do not represent the interests of the Ukrainian state. This includes the ban on the Moscow Patriarchate and the liberation of the information space, just as we did in the past by banning Russian social media platforms such as VKontakte and Odnoklassniki, as well as prohibiting the broadcasting of Russian television series and other content. All of this is what the *russkyi mir*[6] is trying to impose on us.

Moreover, we have our own institutions, established after the Revolution of Dignity, such as the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, the Book Research Institute, and the Ukrainian Institute. Ukrainians themselves must recognise how important this is. We strive to show that Ukraine is becoming a sovereign actor – by understanding who we are, where we are heading, and what our vision is.

This is, of course, also a matter of security. That is why, together with partners such as the New Europe Centre, we are working on a vision for real security guarantees, because the agreements we currently have do not ensure Ukraine's safety. Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal, the third largest in the world, and it cannot remain Europe's eternal shield. Europe must help Ukraine win this war together, rather than assuming that if something

6 The Russian world (Russian: Русский мир, romanised: Russkiy mir) – a concept and political doctrine usually defined as the sphere of Russia's military, political, and cultural influence. It refers to communities with historical, cultural, or spiritual ties to Russia. President Vladimir Putin established the government-funded Russkiy Mir Foundation to promote the idea of the 'Russian world' abroad, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_world.

happens to Ukraine today, they will simply be prepared because they have weapons in storage.

This is a catastrophe, and Western partners must understand that the European Union, without Ukraine, will not be able to effectively confront the axis of evil – especially when China is conducting military exercises with Belarus. Even now, in the European theatre, alongside the Russian aggressor, there is also China, with its entire apparatus of industrial espionage. Some politicians believe that if Ukraine ceases to be the shield, their country will take its place, and they feel secure only because they have amassed a large stockpile of weapons.

The CIA and many other intelligence agencies miscalculated in their predictions that Ukraine would fall, as they relied primarily on mathematical calculations. On one side, Russia, with its overwhelming military and manpower advantage; on the other, a weaker Ukraine. But they failed to account for the most crucial factor – the will and spirit to fight.

If we look at many countries in the European Union, I do not see that same fighting spirit. I see people who have become consumers of the security they inherited, and that is a huge problem. It is a mistake to believe that simply increasing armaments is enough. Take Poland, for example – will buying 50 F-35s, 4,000 tanks, and 500 HIMARS ensure security? I want to see what percentage of people are ready to mobilise and fight. I am talking about now, before they have seen advancing tanks. And I want to see what that percentage will be when they face a swarm of attacking drones.

That is why my message is this: help now so that this war does not reach your borders. This is what we are striving for and what we are constantly working to convince others of.

Is there room for politics during wartime? I mean the activities of political forces. This is also a broader question – what should be done if the war lasts for several more years? This is a question of democracy and elections.

We have a statement from 100 non-governmental organisations and analytical centres explaining why elections are impossible during wartime.

And if the war lasts another 5–10 years?

The war cannot last 5–10 years because Ukraine does not have the human resources to fight for that long. You understand this perfectly well – because otherwise, Poles, Lithuanians, and others must start preparing.

When I speak in the West and say that we cannot fight until the last Ukrainian standing, I ask: what is your scenario if we run out of soldiers? Some respond: you still have a lot of women. I reply: that's great, we also have children who can grow up and go to war in five years. But if this is the West's strategy – if the European Union is waiting for Ukrainian children to grow up and fight – then, sorry, my friends, you are preparing for World War Three, which will be worse than the second and the first combined. This is absolutely wrong and irrational from the perspective of European security.

I am glad that the European Union now has a Commissioner for Defence Union, but can the EU Defence Union truly become a Defence Union without Ukraine?

I was in Taiwan and attended the inauguration of the Taiwanese president. I met with Taiwan's vice president and saw genuine interest in Ukraine's experience – in countering Russia at sea and in applying Ukrainian innovations. Even Taiwan does not have the level of digitalisation that Ukraine does. I spoke with Taiwan's Minister of Digital Affairs, Audrey Tang, who told me that Ukraine has achieved much more than they have in certain areas.

What does the European Union need? Ukraine will bring unique experience and advancements – innovations in drone warfare and strategic rare minerals. And if American leadership collapses, we will fall into decadence, and the Americans will say: we are no longer responsible for Europe, this is your problem. Paying 2% for armaments will not help at all, because if you look at how fast China is militarising, 2% is not enough.

Is it possible to carry out reforms in wartime?

Reforms are essential. We constantly criticise the Ministry of Defence for its use of digital tools, the fight against corruption, scandals, the creation of the defence procurement agency, digital recruitment, mobilisation, Army+, and so on. And all of this is happening during wartime. This is also a way, when elections cannot be held, for us to still shape the agenda.

Of course, our partners have helped us a lot – for example, the European Union with Ukraine's candidate status. When we, as civil society, travelled to Berlin, Stockholm, and Paris demanding candidate status, we were offered various hybrid or quasi-status options. We said: no, we need something real. In return, we asked for clear requirements.

There were seven steps, and we created a coalition to monitor their implementation. Then, a monitoring mission arrived to assess progress. Now, we

are already preparing to open specific negotiation chapters. Our organisation is involved in analysing several chapters, and other organisations are working on this as well.

Why can't NATO issue a formal invitation to Ukraine and give us a letter of conditions, just as the European Union did? Then we, civil society, would have the ability to pressure the Ukrainian authorities, just as we did with the EU accession process. Why can't NATO come and say: here are 15 key reforms?

Previously, international cooperation among Ukrainian civil society organisations was primarily linked to EU countries and the United States. Now, we see an expansion of public diplomacy. You have travelled to Taiwan. How valuable could Taiwan's experience be for Ukraine, and how relevant could Ukraine's experience be for the Taiwanese?

In reality, Taiwan's experience is nothing new for Ukraine. Even during Soviet times, our diaspora maintained contacts with Taiwan, at a time when Ukrainians had no state, were seen as a 'stateless nation', and were told that resistance was pointless – that the USSR was too powerful, and beyond that, there was communist China.

Now, Ukraine has its own state, and together with the Taiwanese, we are nations that love freedom. This is especially significant when viewed in the context of China and Russia. Russia has committed genocide in Chechnya, Ukraine, and Syria, using chemical weapons against children, among other atrocities. Meanwhile, China, with its communist ideology, has engaged in the destruction of the Uyghurs – operating concentration camps, enforcing forced sterilisation of women, and erasing identities.

I believe that freedom fosters unlimited creativity in various fields, whether in science or technology. In this sense, we have a great deal in common with Taiwan. And given that Russia receives clear support from China… China, of course, has its own vision – global ambitions for dominance and a new world order.

In Ukraine, we have a group of analysts, including Mykhailo Honchar and the Strategy XXI Centre, who have produced several excellent reports on this topic. If we consider Ukraine as a historical breadbasket, which Stalin tried to destroy through the Holodomor,[7] then today Ukraine has transformed into a 21st-century nation – a spiritual breadbasket. Because when the Pope,

7 Holodomor – also known as the Ukrainian Famine, was a mass famine in Soviet Ukraine from 1932 to 1933 that killed between 7 and 10 million people, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holodomor.

speaking from the Vatican, equates the victim with the aggressor, there can be no talk of values.

True values were defended by our soldiers in Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and other battlefields. That is why Ukraine has the right to be a moral authority. I am not talking about power – I am talking about those who love their neighbour so much that they give their lives for them.

We see countless stories from the front line of soldiers rushing to help wounded comrades. This is true brotherhood and the highest meaning of life. That is why I believe Ukraine must also remind Europe, which has drifted into consumerism, that it has strayed from the ideals of the European Union's founding fathers. They spoke of Christian values as the foundation for economic doctrine and renewal. This is why it matters so much to us.

Taiwan was once part of the United Nations, and we understand how it was ultimately abandoned for geopolitical interests. Looking beyond EU and NATO membership, Ukraine's task for the future is to join the club of technologically advanced nations. There is an ongoing struggle over who will gain access to the most advanced technologies, such as quantum computing, which will secure governments, military institutions, and more.

Of course, it is crucial to cooperate with those who share the same values. Taiwan was a natural choice for our ANTS network. We were fully aware that China was watching. There is risk – even a security risk. But this is a matter of values.

Interview by Piotr Andrusieczko

Over 50% of Donations Still Come from People

Interview with Taras Chmut

How was the Come Back Alive Foundation established, and how has it changed over time?

The Come Back Alive Foundation (*Повернись живим*) emerged in 2014 with the start of the anti-terrorist operation in eastern Ukraine as a grassroots initiative led by a small group – just three to five people – who began gathering supplies. At the time, it was a classic form of volunteering. People worked their regular jobs while collecting sleeping bags, first aid mats, boots, uniforms – everything that was needed.

Over the course of those first few months, two important things became clear. First, it was impossible to do this work effectively while maintaining a full-time job. In other words, it could not remain a hobby – achieving real results required a professional approach. During this period, some team members left, while others transitioned to minimal salaries covered by individual business partners.

Maksym Ischenko from Donetsk, who now runs two IT companies, DOU and Djinni, was the first sponsor of Come Back Alive. Later, Uklon, a Ukrainian taxi service that has since

Taras Chmut, director of the Come Back Alive Foundation, was born in 1991 in Zhytomyr Oblast. At the age of 16, he co-founded the Ukrainian Military Portal, which remains active to this day.

With the onset of Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine in 2014, Chmut supported the Ukrainian army as a volunteer. In 2015, he signed a military contract and served in the Marine Corps, taking part in combat operations in Donbas.

He left the army in 2017 with the rank of sergeant. He then joined Come Back Alive, which was established in 2014 to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Chmut co-founded the foundation's analytical department, later becoming its head. In 2020, he took over as director of the entire organisation.

After the Russian invasion in 2022, Come Back Alive significantly expanded its operations, becoming one of the largest non-governmental organisations systematically supporting the Armed Forces of Ukraine. It raises funds to purchase weapons and equipment for combat units, organises training to enhance

military skills, and works to support reforms within Ukraine's defence structures. Come Back Alive was the first non-governmental organisation in Ukraine to receive a licence for the purchase of weapons.

expanded internationally, joined in. Others followed afterward.

The second key lesson from that period was the need for focus. It was impossible to provide everything for everyone – resources were naturally limited, so it was essential to identify where each hryvnia[1] would have the greatest impact.

At the time, the primary focus became thermal imaging cameras. The army needed eyes. The foundation became the military's largest supplier of thermal imaging devices, delivering around a thousand units before the full-scale invasion.

Over time, the organisation evolved into a legal entity and a structured workplace with a dedicated team.

Between 2014 and 2017, new specialisations emerged, such as sniping and mine safety. The need for training became evident. It became clear that one hryvnia invested in education and training yielded greater results than any equipment – and this ratio has remained unchanged. Education and training are the most effective forms of investment.

Around 2016, the foundation began working with Phantom drones. While serving in the army, I flew one of the first Phantoms we received from Come Back Alive.

Other projects followed, including digital artillery, air defence development, and the modernisation of OSA anti-aircraft missile systems. The year 2017 was a turning point when we decided to establish an analytical department to focus on what comes after the war – such as the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning veterans, as well as systemic transformations in the security and defence sector.

Analysis, advocacy, lobbying, and direct action were all necessary. In other words, the foundation could procure and deliver resources where they were needed most at any given time.

Since 2020, the foundation has undergone a transformation – we established a supervisory board, changed the director, restructured the organisation, and began actively expanding.

1 Ukrainian currency (UAH).

In 2022, the full-scale invasion marked a new phase in our work. Today, we are the largest apolitical non-governmental charity organisation in Ukraine, having raised nearly UAH 13 billion.[2]

On our website, you can find the correct exchange rate for the dollar each day, as one million hryvnias today and one million hryvnias yesterday can represent entirely different amounts. However, in dollars, the equivalent sum is calculated accurately.

Since 2022, almost everything has changed. We have grown from 30 to 168 people. Our turnover has increased from UAH 2 million[3] to an average of UAH 300 million[4] per month. We now operate in 19 areas, including weaponry and military supplies. We are the first non-governmental organisation in Ukraine to officially purchase dual-use military goods, including lethal weapons. At the same time, we continue to develop our analytical work and veteran support initiatives, which this year were separated into the Come Back Alive Initiatives Centre, now operating as an independent entity.

We have upheld the same core principles since 2014: maintaining an apolitical stance, ensuring transparent reporting, and managing separate financing. Above all, we remain committed to our guiding principle – identifying areas where each hryvnia spent yields the greatest impact.

I am not sure whether you have looked into the experiences of other countries, but your organisation seems to be something of a phenomenon…

When considering how to transform our public reporting, we analysed 10 to 15 of the largest organisations worldwide to understand how their reporting systems function. In terms of transparency, there is no comparable organisation, even in Ukraine, that operates in such a convenient and publicly accessible format.

All our incoming funds are processed automatically online, all our purchases are made online, and everything we have donated is visible online.

Since 2022, order updates have been published twice a week, while expenditure reports are updated three times a month. Any soldier or individual can visit our website and see what their military unit has received from the Come Back Alive foundation. Of course, some items are not made public,

2 Around EUR 300 million (as of March 2025).

3 Around EUR 45,000.

4 Around EUR 7 million.

particularly equipment for the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, and there is a delay of a few weeks or months in reporting certain deliveries.

In Ukraine, we have established a specific standard of operation. As far as we know, there are no similar organisations anywhere in the world.

Why did you decide to join the foundation?

It was an opportunity... My entire life has been dedicated to military affairs. I am also the founder of Militarnyi,[5] a Ukrainian – and now possibly Polish – project that we have been developing since 2008. The armed forces and military affairs have always been close to me.

The foundation had been a partner of Militarnyi for many years, and this was an opportunity to have a more systematic impact on the transformation of the security and defence sector. I joined Come Back Alive through the analytical department. Together with Artem Davydenko, an officer of the Armed Forces, we established this department, conducted the first research, and later, I became its head – eventually becoming the foundation's director.

For me, this is an opportunity to make a meaningful impact on real changes in the army. It also reflects a certain uniqueness of Ukraine and our environment, as Ukraine is one of the most democratic countries in the world. In a way, it is co-governed by the people through Facebook – and it truly works. Policies, politicians, and officials can be influenced, while corruption can be exposed through social media. Public pressure on social media genuinely changes reality. I don't think anything like this exists anywhere else.

The foundation enjoys an excellent reputation – we have specialists and the trust of the military, which allows us to highlight problems, whether publicly or behind the scenes. We strive to work discreetly and drive change from the outside, because changing the system from within is almost impossible.

I would like to ask about the role of citizens, not only in the work of Come Back Alive but also in the broader initiatives supporting the army in Ukraine. This was evident in 2014 and again in 2022.

Euromaidan was preceded by the Orange Revolution, and before that, the Revolution on Granite. Ukrainians have an ability to unite during critical moments in their history.

5 Available at: https://mil.in.ua/.

Over the past ten years, the culture of charity in Ukraine has evolved – perhaps more than anywhere else in the world. Donating money or assets has become a societal norm and a mark of good manners. This sets Ukraine apart from other countries and environments – it is, in a way, an inclusive phenomenon.

Some people support the army, while others contribute to reconstruction efforts, help animals, assist the children of fallen soldiers, aid internally displaced persons and pensioners, support cancer patients, or take part in rebuilding parks and forests. Public fundraising – for money, resources, labour, and blood donations – has become widespread and normal. This represents a significant qualitative change in Ukrainian society.

In one interview, you mentioned that 2024 did not start well in terms of donations. On the other hand, we remember the surge in the first months of Russia's full-scale aggression when enormous sums flowed from society. It is understandable that there is a certain fatigue, and people are in a worse economic situation. How much has the situation changed?

When it comes to ordinary people, 2022 was undoubtedly the peak year for both us and the country. And it started in February, even before the invasion. Just a few days prior, we raised more in a single day than we had in the entire previous year. By 25 February, Come Back Alive's fundraising through the crowdfunding platform Patreon was ranked first in the world, but it was blocked on the second day of the full-scale invasion.

People were anxious, worried, afraid, and under stress. The key question was: what could they do? But by then, it was already too late, and apart from joining the territorial defence, taking part in some courses, or ensuring the safety of themselves and their loved ones, the only thing people could do was donate money.

Looking at 2022 as a whole, February and March were the peak months for donations. This happened for several reasons. First, our foundation was listed on the government services platform Diia,[6] through which donations could be made. Second, we had already been verified as a foundation during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the state reimbursed citizens for expenses on

6 Diia (Ukrainian: Дія) – a mobile app for e-governance in Ukraine. Launched in 2020, it allows Ukrainian citizens to use digital documents on their smartphones instead of physical ones for identification and sharing purposes. The Diia portal provides access to over 130 government services, making it one of the world's leading e-governance solutions, https://en.wikipedia.org/Pwiki/Diia.

books or theatre tickets, and it was also possible to allocate funds for charitable purposes.

Third, the key question was: who should people donate to? There were hardly any large public organisations supporting the army. We were the biggest – in fact, the only one.

On the downside, as an organisation, we were not prepared for such an influx of funds. Our website crashed, banking systems failed, and we faced numerous issues. We needed far more accounts in different currencies and a more flexible interface. We were not at the level we are now.

Then, from April, when the battle of Kyiv ended, until May, there was a period of stabilisation, followed by a decline starting in June. The charity sector is now evolving. First, there are many more players. United24, a fundraising platform, has emerged, along with other foundations – large, medium-sized, and many small ones. Private initiatives have appeared, as well as new tools like monobanks, where soldiers or their friends started raising funds.

Since 2023 and into 2024, the increase in mobilisation has led more people to donate directly – to their husbands, close friends, neighbours, classmates, and relatives. There is hardly a family without someone in the military. The balance between donating to a large foundation for something significant and giving to a friend for something specific is shaped by emotional connection, as charity is a deeply emotional process.

In our work, we rely on rationality, cause and effect, logic, and efficiency. The sector has seen several serious scandals involving individuals, including military personnel, who misused fundraising for personal gain. Since the war began in 2014, there has not been a single such scandal involving us. This has been a strong argument in our favour. Our political neutrality towards all players also attracts donors. Our transparent reporting is impressive, and our direct, high-quality, and honest communication with people is something that many others are likely lacking.

All these factors contribute to the fact that our level of donations in 2024 has decreased by only 15% compared to the previous year, and I believe we will balance it out. The end of the year is always a peak period, as organisations finalise budgets and surplus funds are directed toward charitable causes. In December 2023, we raised nearly a billion in a single month. That is why we expect to reach the same amount by the end of 2024.

In other organisations, the decline ranges from 40% to 200% – which is significant.

Our strength also lies in the fact that we started collaborating with businesses at the right time, working with what are likely the most effective leading Ukrainian companies in this regard: Nova Poshta, Okko (a petrol station network), Kyivstar (a mobile operator), and Aurora (a retail chain).

So, are they the ones donating most of the funds?

No, it is still the people. Businesses and state-owned companies contribute up to 50% at most. We also collaborate with major state corporations such as Ukrnafta, Naftogaz, Ukrhydroenergo, and Ukrenergo. These two components – private and state-owned companies – now account for up to 50% of total contributions.

However, the trend has been shifting: initially, it was 10%, then 20%, then 30%, then 40%, and now we are talking about 40–50%. At the same time, our collaboration with businesses has grown. Our partnership department is expanding, and more people are engaging with companies. Meanwhile, the number of individual transactions has indeed decreased – by almost half.

The level of income and support depends not so much on external factors as on how effectively we engage with them. Change is necessary, adaptation is essential, and new approaches must be taken because the tools and conditions that worked in the past no longer deliver results today. Ultimately, it comes down to the effective management of the organisation, its reputation, and its environment.

To what extent do Russian massive attacks affect donations?

In our case, not significantly, because we do not play on emotions. We have deliberately moved away from launching rapid fundraising campaigns immediately after an attack. While this approach can generate large sums by tapping into people's emotions, we consider it wrong and unethical.

We can express gratitude to the military for their work, and we can highlight some of our projects, but we do not run urgent fundraising drives day after day simply because, for example, a hospital in Kyiv was hit today and now we are collecting money for revenge in Kursk.

I believe this is the right approach, even though, in terms of fundraising, we could potentially increase our annual budget by 10–20%. However, it would be unfair to the people.

You mentioned that many different funds have emerged, mostly smaller ones. In these conditions, is there potential for collaboration between different organisations?

Yes and no. To be honest, we are competitors – and that's normal. Most people won't say it, but it's the truth. It's a healthy competition.

Do we collaborate with other funds? Yes, with some. These might be business or corporate foundations, or funds with which we coordinate certain activities. There was a lot of this in 2022 because everything was happening somewhat chaotically. Back then, we could, for example, send 500 tablets to the front from our stock because another organisation had run out, while they could supply us with 100 Mavic drones because we had none left. That was standard practice.

We shared pricing, suppliers, and information about unreliable vendors – and there were many, including in Europe. We exchanged details on who was supplying what to whom to avoid duplication, as military personnel, especially those in the media, know everyone, visit all organisations, and often end up receiving more. We try to prevent this by distributing resources evenly rather than prioritising those who take the most photos on Instagram.

Medium and large organisations are usually preoccupied with their own internal challenges related to organisational transformation. As a foundation, we have deliberately stayed out of coalitions, associations, and similar initiatives for years, maintaining a certain distance due to reputational risks – we simply want to do our job well.

Our procurement activities are fully transparent – anyone can check the prices, just as they can see what we have provided to the army. In public interactions, we do not refuse anyone. Almost all organisations operate this way.

We had several major projects with United24, such as Operation Unity and Operation Unity 2.0, where we raised funds for 10,000 and 5,000 FPV drones. It was a great example of collaboration, but United24 is not a foundation – it is a fundraising platform. They know how to raise funds, but they do not spend them directly. Instead, they transfer them to the state or government institutions.

In contrast, we operate within a closed cycle, so we combined our strengths: their ability to raise money and our expertise in purchasing, delivering, and reporting. The result was two groundbreaking charity projects that proved

even conditional competitors can unite and achieve remarkable outcomes. This was significant because many believed that large-scale projects were no longer viable. Yet by working together, we raised UAH 220 million in just two days. Let's call it a small revolution.

The mentioned United24 attracts a lot of funds from abroad…

Primarily from abroad.

Is this also a focus for your organisation?

Yes, we have an international division within the Department of Development and Partnerships. Three people are working specifically on Europe and the United States. We already have an American office – a legal entity in the US that has obtained non-profit status and has a separate website. I believe that over time, we will expand our engagement there.

In 2024, we actively collaborated with Europe, including Sweden, Norway, the Czech Republic, Germany, and other countries. We are working to attract public funds, as this is a strategic priority. Additionally, we are developing tactical partnerships with businesses and various communities to raise funds. These do not generate massive contributions in the millions of euros but rather local donations of around EUR 10,000–20,000 each. However, together, these efforts amount to approximately USD 500,000.

We had a great experience working with the Poles and the Turkish drone manufacturer Baykar. In July 2022, Poles raised PLN 24.8 million to buy a drone,[7] but Baykar donated a Bayraktar instead. Part of the collected funds was redirected to the Turkish Embassy in Ukraine, which allocated them for humanitarian needs, while another portion was received by Come Back Alive.

With these funds, we purchased a tent camp from the Polish company Lubawa for a battalion of the 150th Training Corps of the Territorial Defence Forces, where specialists for all territorial defence brigades are trained. We also bought two maintenance workshops for a Marine Corps battalion, where various Western and non-Western armoured vehicles used by our army are repaired.

We are interested in international projects, but for now, they do not generate significant funds. We are expanding our team and striving to work more in-depth. Analysts from the Initiatives Centre are heavily engaged, though

7 See: https://zrzutka.pl/bayraktar.

their work is more related to intelligence, intelligence services, and think tanks – focusing on analysing Russia, as well as Africa in the context of the Wagner Group. Other key topics include the future of warfare (Future Force) and various aspects of transforming defence forces.

How do you assess the current situation? In other words, at what stage of the war are we in the autumn of 2024?

The situation is difficult and dire. In Donbas, we are on the defensive, frontline breaches are increasing, and we are desperately lacking manpower, weapons, equipment, and the capability to fully utilise them. In 2024, the energy sector has suffered greatly, and it remains unclear what the situation will be like in winter. We are witnessing a significant economic downturn and a severe demographic crisis. On a broader scale, the country is facing its hardest times since the Second World War and the war of liberation from the Nazis.

Looking at the positive side, it is clear that Ukraine will not lose its independence, sovereignty, or identity as a self-sufficient country with its own political processes, vision, and future. However, the price for this is extremely high, and unfortunately, no one knows what the end of the war will look like. The conditions remain uncertain, as the signals we receive from Europe and the United States do not satisfy anyone in Ukraine.

On one hand, it is clear that Ukraine is almost entirely funded by Western money, as all internal funds are directed solely toward the war effort. Without Western support, we would have no means to continue fighting. On the other hand, the Budapest Memorandum, with its guarantees and commitments, has proven meaningless in the modern world.

No one knows what will happen next. But while others sit and deliberate slowly, Ukraine is paying a high price. We are losing many people, territories, and towns that are being wiped off the map.

In many interviews, you say that people are the main problem…

People are the biggest problem. In 2022, there were many. In 2023, there were still enough. In 2024, there are not. The issue is that the passive, sluggish, and weak West does provide what we need, but not when we need it – only much later. As a result, the value of this aid is sometimes diminished.

We received F-16s, tanks, ATACMS, HIMARS, Storm Shadow, and Harpoon missiles. Had all of this been delivered at least six months earlier, the situation on the battlefield would be completely different. If the West had provided

in 2022 everything it is willing to give now, the war might already be over. And if it had done so in 2020–2021, the war might never have happened.

The West continues to make mistakes, and at some point, those mistakes will spill over into their own comfort zone.

To what extent can the newly adopted mobilisation law change the situation? Or is it already doing so? How much can it strengthen the Ukrainian army?

Many have been mobilised, but the problem is that we are not institutionally efficient – because we are still a young country. Some count our transformation from 2022, others from 2014. Our internal institutions remain weak, though they are evolving rapidly.

If we compare Ukraine in 2024, 2020, 2015, and 2004, every five-year period has brought enormous change. This suggests that our rate of progress is among the fastest in the world. Perhaps some countries in Africa are developing at a similar pace, but we are changing very quickly. However, this is still not enough to say that we are a fully developed, high-functioning state.

That is why the number of people in the army does not equate to the quality of training, supply, or distribution – because all of this is managed by inefficient institutions, and institutional reform takes time. So, while there are many people, the key question is who they are. Many are over 50, have health issues, lack education, or are unmotivated. That is the real challenge.

On the positive side, the mobilisation of prisoners has been an exception. Commanders report very good feedback on them – they are motivated, disciplined, and positive, making them good soldiers. However, their numbers remain very low – fortunately for the country, but unfortunately for the war.

Another missed opportunity was attracting foreign volunteers. We failed to bring them in sufficient numbers, did not create suitable conditions, and lacked incentives. We could have had 30,000–50,000 of these people – a significant force. Not necessarily for the battlefield, as many were likely not combat-ready, but as a valuable resource that could have fulfilled many other functions.

Will Ukraine be forced to lower the mobilisation age further? It is currently set at 25 years.

I support lowering it to 20, but it is a highly controversial issue. On one hand, it is easy for me to sit in Kyiv and propose reducing the mobilisation age. On

the other hand, what comes next? Another year will pass, and we will continue losing territory.

Russia has almost always won by playing the long game, as in Afghanistan or during the Cold War, but the balance of resources was different in those cases. The problem is not just the number of people but their quality and the rational use of available resources. I believe efforts should focus on recruitment and improving efficiency. For Russia, mobilising 500,000 people is not an issue – just as 150,000 is now a challenge for us.

Does this mean that the Ukrainian army requires further reforms? Not only the army but the entire defence sector? Is this even possible during wartime?

This must be done during the war. The full-scale war has only been going on for three years, but it actually started ten years ago. So if not now, then when?

Of course, you don't carry out reforms during something like the battle for Kyiv. But there are periods when it has to be done. The war is changing. You cannot win a war in 2025 with the army and approach of 2021. The battlefield evolves rapidly – every four to six months. Such a pace of change has never been seen in history before. And it's not just about technology, which is often overestimated.

War, by its nature, always comes down to the same fundamentals – tactics, equipment, people, resources, economy, and so on. The essence of all wars remains the same, and this one is no different. Victory will belong to those who adapt more quickly to changes in the environment and seize technological opportunities faster – such as FPV drones.

We did not fully exploit the potential of FPV drones or turn our tactical advantage into a strategic one. We failed to transform our night bombings into a strategic advantage. We did not make naval drones a strategic advantage. We did not turn deep strikes on enemy territory into a strategic advantage.

We celebrate successes, we achieve good results – but we fall into the trap of self-satisfaction.

You said that Ukraine is probably one of the largest democratic countries. Can ordinary citizens influence military and national reforms during the war?

Of course, they can. That's how it works.

Firstly, a large number of mobilised civilians have joined the army and are changing its internal culture. Secondly, many people outside the military continue to provide support. Thirdly, there is still positive pressure from our international partners, which is beneficial and should increase even further.

On the other hand, we face one of our strategic problems: over the past two decades, we have created the illusion that civil service and government officials are inherently bad. Additionally, we have built such a strong image of hyper-corruption in the media that we perceive ourselves as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. But in reality, this is far from the truth. If you visit Indonesia, Malaysia, Latin America, or even some European countries, you will see that corruption is no less prevalent there. It exists in every country in different forms and has various practical implications.

We have exaggerated this issue to the point where a vast number of capable people do not want to work for the state. They do not want to become deputy ministers, ministers, or heads of state-owned companies. As a result, ineffective managers fail to deliver significant results and drive meaningful change. That is why we are in the situation we are in.

We need to change our approach to public service – improving salaries for state positions, reducing excessive oversight, while at the same time increasing the inevitability of punishment for misconduct. When more competent people join state-owned enterprises and the public sector, we will see greater change. Right now, they are still the exception.

We have an excellent Ministry of Digital Transformation, a strong army, and a Ministry of Defence that has begun a reform process unlike anything seen in 30 years. The same is now happening with public procurement. But it feels like these changes are happening despite the system rather than because of it.

We Can Do Things More Rationally, More Intelligently, and Explain Them to Society

Interview with Andriy Dlihach

Can we say that business in Ukraine has become more socially responsible, and how has the war influenced this?

We are starting with the most difficult question. Business is, of course, patriotic and responsible, but that is the simple answer. In reality, the situation is more complex: 90% of entrepreneurs – this is an exact figure, as we constantly monitor the situation – support the Armed Forces of Ukraine or engage in humanitarian projects. At the same time, it is important to note that around 18% have stopped operating, meaning that even businesses on pause are still looking for ways to help.

Many Ukrainian companies have relocated abroad but continue to support the Armed Forces and invest in Ukraine's defence industry. So far, 1,500 new defence companies have been established. Most businesses have relocated away from occupied territories, but, for example, companies in Kharkiv remain operational despite ongoing shelling – and some are even building underground facilities.

The fact that corruption persists in the country is largely due to an imperfect system and corrupt officials. Running a fully transparent

Andriy Dlihach is an economist, scientist, and social activist, born in 1972 in Kyiv. He graduated from the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute in 1995 with dual specialisations in marketing in the production sector and mathematical methods for optimising systems.
In the early 1990s, Dlihach developed the first Ukrainian-language spell-checking tools for MS-DOS, Windows, and MacOS. In 1995, he founded Advanter Group,[1] a company specialising in marketing and strategic consulting. Since then, he has combined business leadership with academic work.
Since 2002, Dlihach has taught at the Faculty of Economics at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. In 2016, he earned his habilitation degree with a dissertation on systemic-reflective strategic marketing management in business activities in Ukraine. He also lectures at institutions such as the Kyiv School of Economics.

1 See: Advanter Group, https://advanter.ua/en (accessed 10 February 2025).

Beyond academia, Dlihach has played a key role in social and economic reforms. He was a founding member of the Ukrainian Republican Club and, since 2014, has contributed to major economic reforms, co-authoring initiatives such as the Prozorro public procurement system, land market regulations, and tax reforms. In 2022, Dlihach co-authored the Anti-Corruption Tax Reform, and in 2023, he became the head of the Voice of Civil Society project, which fosters collaboration between the government, civil society experts, and businesses on state policies.

business here is difficult. At the same time, businesses both accept the practice of paying bribes and fear the exposure of bribery cases. Some businesses remain in the shadows, operating within grey schemes that are common even among public companies. Many entrepreneurs invest outside Ukraine while remaining in the country. This is a matter of business rationality – if you want to keep your company running in Ukraine despite external pressures and continue supporting the Armed Forces, you need a backup plan. That is why businesses are actively investing abroad.

Despite such a complex model, businesses must operate not only according to official regulations but also within the constraints imposed by corrupt officials. This is a matter of survival – ensuring the ability to export and expand beyond Ukraine. It involves maintaining staff while also recognising that part of the workforce may need to be replaced by artificial intelligence or foreign workers. In some cases, it may even be necessary to relocate part of the workforce abroad and help specialists cross the border. All of this makes business both responsible and rational.

To what extent should the state act as a regulator in a country like Ukraine? What are the main obstacles? You already mentioned corruption.

Corruption is a consequence, not a cause. What hinders business the most is the lack of rational, modern rules for conducting business.

What should be changed? First and foremost, the rule of law. In Europe, property rights, including intellectual property rights, are protected – in Ukraine, they are not. That is why inventors register their patents abroad. Companies suffer from forced takeovers based on falsified documentation. The number of corporate raids and hostile takeovers has increased significantly during the war – in 2023 alone, we recorded around 600 such cases.

Secondly, a liberal economy. There is constant talk that Europe has higher taxes. However, we conducted a detailed analysis, and the effective tax burden on businesses in Europe is actually much lower than in Ukraine. In

Ukraine, taxes are disproportionately high relative to the level of economic development.

We are often told that Europe would never accept a tax on withdrawn capital, yet it has already been introduced in many European countries. We hear that Europe would never agree to lowering labour taxation, but it was significantly reduced in Bulgaria when Kristalina Georgieva, now head of the International Monetary Fund, was working there – and Bulgaria's economy began to grow. In Europe, new businesses benefit from a wide range of tax incentives, and some investment costs are even reimbursed. None of this is available in Ukraine. Therefore, a liberal tax reform is necessary in Ukraine.

Even more important is the reform of the tax and customs authorities themselves. Unfortunately, in Ukraine, these institutions do not function as regulatory bodies but rather as policing agencies. They force businesses into dishonest practices, making them pay part of their taxes in the form of bribes – with disastrous consequences.

To put it into perspective, in 2023, Ukrainian businesses paid UAH 500 billion in corruption rent, UAH 200 billion in donations, and UAH 700 billion in taxes.

Where do these figures come from?

We conduct economic modelling, which allows us to speak candidly with company CFOs and calculate their actual financial flows. We are trusted, which enables us to analyse the economy as a whole.

That is why customs and tax authorities must be reformed. Europe is heavily overregulated, but it only became so after implementing liberal reforms.

Ukraine must now deregulate its economy. If we join the European Union without first undergoing a period of economic growth, it will be disastrous for Ukraine's economy. We need five years of liberal reforms and deregulation to foster innovative enterprises and a virtual economy, allowing Ukraine to become a testing ground – even for the EU itself – to understand how to become more competitive.

Next, we need privatisation. A large part of the financial sector, particularly in banking, is state-owned – over half of the sector is controlled by the state, accounting for 60% of the banking market. We must privatise many enterprises, including some strategic ones, and we should not fear this. Additionally, we need to normalise the work of the Anti-Monopoly Committee and reform public procurement.

We managed to make public procurement transparent, but now, due to the war and imposed restrictions, corrupt officials exploit the e-procurement system, effectively tailoring tenders for specific suppliers. This is precisely what the Anti-Monopoly Committee must eliminate. When we first developed the Prozorro strategy, we aimed to introduce a safeguard in the form of civil society oversight. This meant that professional industry associations would identify improperly drafted tender applications and specifications to prevent tenders from being designed for pre-selected suppliers.

Once we implement this full set of reforms, we will have legal protection and liberal conditions for doing business. Ukraine will undoubtedly be able to become a land of opportunity. Before the aggression, we used to say that Ukraine had key advantages such as cheap labour, fertile land, logistical potential, and affordable energy. Now, we have lost all of that. There is a shortage of skilled workers, energy is expensive, fields are mined, and soil fertility is declining – not only due to landmines or climate change but also because irrigation systems have been destroyed. We have become a logistical dead end.

We have lost all our competitive advantages. At the level of business, society, and the state, we must rethink who we are. And we are a country of adaptability, innovation, and opportunity. Once we embed this positioning into law and our social contract, we will be capable of making a breakthrough.

You mentioned that civil society should be involved in certain processes. In one of your earlier comments, you spoke about the inclusive formulation of development strategies. What role should civil society play in economic transformation?

Unlike Western European societies, our state lacks an institutional approach. What does this mean? Our government does not understand what institutions are or how to build them. The Soviet Union had an institutional approach, but its institutions were closed. The Communist Party and local executive authorities operated as isolated clans.

Modernisation requires the opposite approach – society and the state must build open institutions. Government leaders must recognise that their role is not to make all the decisions themselves but to create the space where those decisions can be formed. There is a legislative body – the parliament – which enacts laws, and an executive branch that implements them. But before laws are introduced, there must first be state policies and strategies. This is where political strategies come from.

Western societies understand that no matter how professional a government is, it cannot manage everything on its own. For society to accept new laws, it must be involved in shaping policies and strategies. That is why it has been recognised that institutions should be built as inclusive and open systems, bringing together civil society experts and businesses to develop solutions. Many academic articles and books – such as *Why Nations Fail*[1] – argue that successful countries are not only democratic but have also established true inclusivity within their institutions.

In Ukraine, the current government does not understand what strategic planning entails – we do not have a national strategy. It also does not grasp what institutions are or why they should be inclusive. However, we insist that this must change. What's more, in some areas, progress is being made.

For example, a national demographic development strategy was recently adopted and announced. It was developed collaboratively by the Ministry of Social Policy, the Ministry of Economy, analytical centres, international partners, donors and businesses. Similarly, the strategy for small and medium-sized enterprise development was inclusively designed within the Ministry of Economy. However, when it comes to judicial reform or reforming law enforcement agencies, the government consistently tries to exclude businesses, analytical centres and civil society activists from policy-making.

Moreover, instead of first formulating policies, draft laws appear immediately. This is absurd because before legislation is proposed, there should be a consensus on what we actually want to introduce.

So what is civil society doing now? First and foremost, it is working on shaping a vision for the country. A vision for Ukraine has already been developed by a coalition of the business community. Similarly, civil society has its own vision. These are not contradictory – rather, it is an iterative process, where the overall tasks are divided into smaller, repeatable cycles.

We have a vision and know what we want. I can say that civil society envisions Ukraine as a country of opportunity, a state focused on people, where we have a safe space in terms of individual rights protection and physical security. In return, society is willing to take on greater individual responsibility. This is the vision of the state. To implement it, we must work together with the state to develop strategies and policies in every sphere.

1 See: D. Acemoglu, J.A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, Random House, 2013.

In 2023, we launched the Voice of Civil Society project, through which we attempted to model this process. The vast majority of ministries agreed to cooperate, but the Verkhovna Rada did not, and neither did the President's Office – it remains completely closed off.

When an extreme situation arises, such as when pressure from law enforcement agencies exceeds all limits and businesses begin to resist publicly and actively, the President's Office starts to feel threatened. However, it still does not take the step of establishing a real, inclusive institution to help create a new policy for business protection and economic development.

Instead of strengthening the existing and trusted Business Ombudsman Institution, the President's Office has created the Business Support Council under the President of Ukraine. It does not allow businesses to institutionalise themselves, even though we already have an existing institution and a clear position – we are asking them to talk to us. Instead, the President's Office creates an entirely different body which, although it includes good people, unfortunately does not represent the interests of businesses but rather the interests of the president.

So, what reforms does Ukraine need the most?

First, we understand that all possibilities for isolated, small-scale reforms have been exhausted. The government is now trying to raise taxes, but this will not solve anything. It will only push businesses further into the grey economy and reduce investment. Any additional restrictions will lead to more problems.

However, there are targeted solutions that can be implemented immediately. For example, the labour shortage in business is reaching a critical level.

Companies are already lacking 30% of their workforce – and the reason is simple: they are hiding, afraid of mobilisation. Perhaps the state needs to increase recruitment efforts and introduce more motivated mobilisation, while businesses should receive economic exemptions to bring people out of hiding and boost budget revenues. Our calculations show that this could generate an additional UAH 200 billion in revenue for the state.

There are many such targeted reforms across different sectors, such as unfreezing privatisation, increasing business activity and deregulation. However, all of these are fragmented changes. Systemic, strategic reforms must strengthen the state as a whole. That is why we need administrative

reform – this is the first priority that would enable the creation of inclusive institutions.

Has this ever been implemented? No. There was an attempt to introduce a new evaluation system for public officials, but in the end, it only discouraged professionals from working in government.

But we do have a successful example of decentralisation.

Decentralisation is the most successful reform of the past decade. It was a key breakthrough and a definite success, giving us confidence that we can move forward. Decentralisation, the land market and agricultural sector reforms, and the introduction of the transparent public procurement system Prozorro – these are major achievements. But they are still not enough.

Administrative reform remains unfinished. Judicial reform has not been implemented. We also need to reform the Criminal Procedure Code, the outdated labour laws and the healthcare system – a reform we started but never completed. Then, there is the urgent need for pension fund reform, which would unlock another key reform – the creation of a stock exchange in Ukraine. And, of course, the long-overdue tax and customs system reforms.

All of these together are now Ukraine's top priorities.

Ukraine's path toward the European Union should force an acceleration of these changes, shouldn't it?

We have a very good example in Poland – our friends, neighbours and hopefully long-term partners. Especially now, as it seems a decision has finally been made regarding the exhumations in Volhynia, which had been inexplicably delayed for so long. What I mean is that we are linked to Poland by fate, history and, most importantly, the future. The past may divide, but the future always unites. We should certainly be closer to each other.

Poland provides an example of how to implement reforms. First, Leszek Balcerowicz[2] and his team developed a strategic plan to guide the reforms. Second, Poland relied on society. I am not just referring to trade unions but also to factors that today might, in some ways, limit Poland's ability to pursue a liberal economic policy. For example, Poland has 1.7 million farmers, while

2 Leszek Balcerowicz is a Polish economist who served as Minister of Finance in Tadeusz Mazowiecki's government in 1989. He led free-market economic reforms that transformed Poland into one of Europe's fastest-growing economies. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leszek_Balcerowicz.

Ukraine has only about 50,000. There was also the influence of the Church, which at that time supported the reforms.

And most importantly, real negotiations with the European Union – not simply conceding positions but engaging 3,000 negotiators who convinced the EU that Poland was a major opportunity for Germany and other countries in terms of investment, infrastructure development, technology, labour and many other factors. That is why Poland secured favourable membership conditions.

In Ukraine, we currently have three negotiators. Soon, there will be thirty. Negotiation teams are being formed, and eventually, we will have 300. But that is still not enough. We need to strengthen our negotiating position. Most importantly, we must change Ukraine's positioning and how it is perceived. Not just through the populist – albeit true – narrative, which Europe has yet to fully embrace, that Ukraine is defending Europe from war.

It is not just about that. Ukraine is a platform for experimentation, a solution to Europe's migration policy challenges and logistical problems. It is a gateway for future Indian companies entering the European Union. What the EU fears now could be tested and implemented in Ukraine during a transitional period.

Europe's energy security can be strengthened through Ukraine, just as its food security can. By working with Ukrainian companies, Europe can regain a foothold in Africa, where it is gradually losing ground due to declining competitiveness – something Ukraine can help resolve.

Until recently, European competitiveness was built on cheap Russian energy, security guarantees from the United States and low-cost goods from China. But Europe has now lost all of that. Ukraine, with its vast gas reserves and solar energy potential, is a solution for Europe. Ukraine, with its capacity to build manufacturing plants, provides an answer for European industry. Ukraine, with its professional and rapidly developing army, is a security guarantee for Europe.

I believe that the European integration process can serve as an incentive for both sides: for Europe to see Ukraine differently and for Ukraine to accelerate its modernisation. However, this should not mean that we simply adopt all European norms, tax policies or regulations. Europe itself must also modernise. That is why this integration process must be mutual.

But first, the war must be ended. You mentioned modernisation several times, and now I would like to ask about reconstruction. You repeatedly said that Ukraine does not need just reconstruction but rather modernisation. However, is it possible to rebuild while the war is still ongoing, or should this wait until it is over?

Reconstruction cannot be postponed. My friend's factory near Zhytomyr was destroyed in a missile attack. The day after the attack, he began rebuilding it. Of course, I asked him why. He gave me two simple reasons. First, if he does not rebuild, it means we have lost. Second, he believes the factory must stay productive and profitable. This is a future-oriented mindset. Yes, we need to insure investments, strengthen air defence and secure the skies over Ukraine. These are all crucial, and we will continue to ask our partners for support. But that does not mean we should delay anything.

At the beginning of 2022, we met in London with international business organisations, public experts and government representatives. It was the first attempt to develop a Ukrainian formula for development. What should we do? The first point of this formula was that Ukraine must take the lead in shaping its own vision. Ukraine must define how it sees itself in the future – it is not for the West to decide. A Ukrainian vision is the top priority.

The second key element is cooperation. The West fears Ukrainian corruption. When Ukraine tells the West that is should give us money and let us decide how to use it, this is alarming, and they hesitate. However, if we add civil society to the equation, we create a triangle. Civil society, together with Western partners, can safeguard the anti-corruption agenda while at the same time, alongside the Ukrainian government, defending Ukraine's national interests. That is why including civil society in these negotiations benefits everyone.

The third element of the formula is that we must move away from the concept of reconstruction and embrace modernisation. There is nothing left to restore – we are dealing with outdated Soviet infrastructure. We do not have a clear answer on whether we should rebuild the hydroelectric power plant destroyed in Kakhovka or use the land differently. Instead, we face broader questions such as what should we build better? We cannot simply rebuild – we must create something entirely new. Everyone seems to fear the word modernisation, and I do not understand why. They have already come up with the phrase *Build Back Better*. But the word *back* raises a question for me.

Ukraine needs to be redefined. Ukraine is a digital country, one of the world leaders in digitalisation. Let's make use of this advantage. Perhaps we should build even more digital infrastructure – new infrastructure. Instead of just roads, we need fast infrastructure. Instead of rebuilding the destroyed Soviet railway, we should immediately construct a high-speed rail link to Kharkiv on a narrow European gauge.

But this is also a question of geography. Why is there hesitation to speak about it openly? Because there is a fear of the Korean scenario – that at some point, a border will be drawn, and we will have to forget about the occupied territories for years and build something new elsewhere.

But that would be Europe's mistake. It would weaken its position and strengthen Putin. Putin does not want a Korean scenario in Ukraine, and we must be fully aware of this. Any ceasefire would mean a partial lifting of sanctions against Russia, reduced aid to Ukraine and open borders. This would lead to population loss and growing political divisions. Ukraine would weaken – and that would mean another war.

That is why we must think about modernising everything now – rebuilding state institutions and infrastructure based on modernisation principles. Our thermal power plants have been destroyed – so what should we build instead? Nuclear power plants? But using old Soviet technologies again?

No, we must build new, compact nuclear generators that can be deployed quickly. Germany has abandoned nuclear energy – Ukraine will save it. Poland has issues with suitable locations for wind farms – they can be built here. Poland will be able to solve its energy problems effectively by using Ukraine's potential.

That is why one of the key aspects of modernisation is thinking about Ukrainian infrastructure in a European context.

Furthermore, Poland is losing competitiveness to Ukraine in the agricultural sector because subsidies do not drive productivity – Polish farmers have small farms, whereas in Ukraine, agriculture is dominated by medium and large farms that use more digitalisation, modern technology and higher productivity. This does not mean that Ukraine should be stripped of this potential. It means that together with Poland, we should now think about a single value-creation chain.

Climate change is radically transforming our agricultural sector. Poland does not have to remain inefficient in agriculture. Perhaps Polish and Ukrainian

companies should work together to develop a future-oriented model, creating technologies for new types of production. This means joint investments in technology and a new approach to food production.

There are many opportunities. Modernisation does not simply mean demining the land and replanting it with sugar beets, which overtake everything and degrade Ukrainian soil.

It also means a different approach to people. We have lost much of our human capital to Poland, as many workers and even businesspeople have moved there. But human capital is still available in Ukraine, so we must use it efficiently. There is less land, it is mined and less fertile, so we need to use it effectively. There is less energy, so we must extract more gas and become an exporter, partially replacing Russia. This means investing in hydrogen technologies.

As we can see, every sector can be redefined. This also applies to the military. Old armies, even European armies, are proving ineffective in modern warfare. Leopards are not as effective as expected. So we must build a new defence sector and a new army. The world and Europe are now testing the technologies of modern warfare in Ukraine. Naturally, based on Ukrainian experience, we will build a modern defence industry for the whole of Europe, not just Ukraine.

I would like to return to the question of so-called economic reservation – the exemption from military service granted to individuals essential to the economy. This issue is currently the subject of serious debate. It also raises questions of justice and Ukraine's survival in this war. Is it even possible to reach a consensus between the needs of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, businesses, and society?

Without a doubt, defence and survival are Ukraine's top priorities. But the problem is that those who focus solely on survival often do not make it. Surviving by depleting human capital means that tomorrow we will lose to the same enemy in a different way – economically or through information warfare. If only pensioners remain in the country, poverty will become widespread, and people will start asking, 'What did we win? What was the point of this victory?' At that moment, we will lose it.

That is why political leaders must explain to society what justice means. And justice, no matter how subjective it may seem, is a clear philosophical concept and a public good. For Ukraine, public good means both military

capability and economic stability. We must survive on the front, win on the front, and win as a society.

There will be no defence capability if businesses do not build industrial enterprises linked to the defence sector. There will be no defence capability if businesses do not directly fund military units. This approach is effective because it saves lives and increases efficiency. After all, who buys electronic warfare systems, who buys drones? Business. That is why we must find a balance and a win-win solution in all these areas.

Starting from this point, we looked for a solution – what should the response be? Economic reservation was misunderstood by society from the beginning. This means it was simply explained poorly. In reality, it is not economic reservation but rather critical personnel reservation. If Ukraine has nearly five million people available for mobilisation and around 200,000 need to be mobilised annually, then in principle, there is sufficient potential. If we now streamline the mobilisation process and utilise every person in the country's best interest in the most efficient way, we will only benefit from it.

Economic reservation does not mean simply preventing mobilisation. It means recognising that every company has a critical mass of people essential for its survival, growth, adaptation of veterans and investment in the defence industry. Every entrepreneur understands this better than any state institution.

Let us give businesses the ability to reserve up to 20% of their workforce – but let them pay for this privilege.

How? The model we developed is based on setting a minimum salary for those employees a business wants to reserve. According to our modelling, conducted across different industries, regions, and both small and large cities, if we set the minimum salary at UAH 30,000 for critical personnel reservation, the maximum number of reserved employees would be 560,000. That is 560,000 out of a five-million mobilisation potential – no more than 15%. This would generate an additional UAH 200 billion in tax revenue for the state budget, which is a substantial amount that could fund recruitment efforts.

We see that recruitment is relatively effective. Right now, around 6,000 people are being recruited each month. People are willing to go, but what they lack is the assurance that they will be taken care of, assigned to a competent commander, and that their families will receive proper support. For their families to be looked after and for them to be well-equipped, businesses

must continue working. When businesses function, recruitment works – and this creates a win-win situation.

This is a matter of fairness. We argue that those who have been on the front lines for two years should have the option of rotation. At the same time, businesses should have the opportunity to reintegrate their critical employees.

But this is something people are afraid to talk about, even in a society that should be braver. Politicians fear for their approval ratings, but what is society afraid of? If a newly mobilised person without experience or training is sent to the front, there is a very high probability that they will die in their first battle.

That is why a far better solution is rotation without full demobilisation – ensuring that our soldiers can rest more but without being completely discharged. Unfortunately, this is something no one dares to say out loud.

What else are people afraid to admit? That as a state, we have acted too populistically. We raised military salaries to a level that has pushed us to the brink of a financial crisis, risking the collapse of the entire economy.

We cannot sustain such payments for the military. Where do our soldiers' wages go? It turns out that part of it is spent on purchasing equipment that the state should be providing. Some buy dollars to save money, some spend it on gambling, and others use it to support their families.

We need to reconsider all of this.

If they are buying dollars to save money, then instead of part of their salary, let's give our soldiers shares in state-owned banks. If they are worried about their families, let's create grant programmes for military families, which could be funded by our international partners, as these would not count as military expenditures.

If we see that money is being spent on gambling, let's provide our soldiers with alternative entertainment – let them trade on the Ukrainian stock exchange. That is also a form of gaming, but one that benefits the economy instead of wasting money.

If they are buying their own equipment, it means the Ministry of Defence is not supplying them effectively. In that case, we should not increase business taxes but instead allow businesses to take responsibility for equipping certain military units.

Businesses are ready – they are already doing it by purchasing equipment.

There are many ways we can act more rationally, more intelligently, and explain this to society.

However, we have a populist state that, instead of focusing on economic modelling and policy, relies solely on simple communication solutions, ignoring common sense, modelling, and economic justification.

Perhaps there has been a lack of an open and broader discussion, but some soldiers do speak and write about it.

Soldiers are afraid to speak publicly. In the 33rd year of our independence, after 10 years of war and everything we have been through, these fears still persist. Unfortunately, that Soviet mentality remains embedded in us.

I cannot say that things are different in Europe – people there are also afraid of many things. But after everything we have endured, we should be setting an example.

Yes, public dialogue is important. But is the government ready for it?

In fact, together with the Ministry of Economy, we developed the concept of personnel reservation a year ago, and it seems that everyone in the professional community supported the idea. Now, political leaders and the nation's moral authorities need to speak up.

Political leaders are afraid, and the nation's moral authorities are burying their heads in the sand. It is simply horrifying and shameful.

We should not be afraid – we should speak about this issue bravely.

Interview by Piotr Andrusieczko

Civil Society in Ukraine: a Sled Dog, Not a Watchdog

Valerii Pekar

Ukraine surprised the world when it suddenly appeared on the map in 1991, and did it again in 2022 when it successfully withstood an attack launched by the second-largest army in the world. Unfortunately, the country remains largely unexplored and misunderstood.

Many Western observers and politicians have developed views of Ukraine based on the theory that the country looks either like a small, yet vocal Russia or an underdeveloped, eccentric eastern Poland. But both views are inaccurate. Ukraine is a fundamentally different entity, and in order to form a successful policy toward Ukraine, one must first understand what this country really is. Then and only then will the peculiarities of Ukrainian statehood and Ukrainian society, as well as all the things that make Ukraine convenient or inconvenient to the world, become clear.

Genesis

Ukraine as a country, state and society is shaped by three factors.

Frontier is the first factor. A frontier is a permanent zone of mutual interaction at the intersection of several distinct social structures: settled and nomadic peoples, different socio-economic systems, cultural, religious

Valeriy Pekar, entrepreneur, social activist, and futurist, was born in 1966 in Kyiv. He studied at the Faculty of Cybernetics at Taras Shevchenko University in Kyiv. In 2007, he completed an MBA at the Kyiv-Mohyla Business School.
In 1992, he co-founded the exhibition company Euroindex and was involved in establishing the KyivExpoPlaza exhibition and convention centre.
He is a lecturer at the Kyiv-Mohyla Business School and the Lviv Business School of the Ukrainian Catholic University. He authored the monograph *Multicoloured Management: The Evolution of Thinking, Leadership, and Management* and has written over 250 articles on management, marketing, information technology, and futurology.
Valeriy Pekar is also actively engaged in social initiatives. During the Revolution of Dignity, he co-founded the Civic Operations Headquarters.
He was a co-founder of the Civic Platform Nova Krayina (New Country), aimed at developing strategies for Ukraine's advancement and implementing reforms. From 2014 to 2016, he served on the National Reform Council, an

advisory body to the President of Ukraine.
In 2024, he was included in New Voice magazine's list of 30 opinion leaders in contemporary Ukraine who, through their publications, statements, and interviews, influence elites and those in power. He focuses on developing possible future scenarios for post-war Ukraine and the world. He is also one of the co-authors of the *Manifesto for Lasting Peace*, a vision of the post-war world from Ukrainian civil society aimed at preventing another war.

and other communities of commensurate power with numerous points of contact. Geographically speaking, Ukraine is at the crossroads of Eurasia – just look at the physical map with its landscape zones, rivers, mountains and impassable swamps, and this becomes obvious. Life at a crossroads is a unique experience: a place where different people, different ideas, and different problems shift in all directions. Very specific communities form at such crossroads, one of which is the Ukrainian community.

It is worth noting that Ukraine does not represent a single frontier between civilisations, but a multifrontier[1] – an intersection of several frontiers. First, between the Forest and the Steppe, settlers and nomads, and later by Christians and Muslims. Secondly, between Europe and the Horde, between the rule of law and the rule of force, and later between democracies and autocracies. Thirdly, between the Land of Eastern Europe and the Sea of the Eastern Mediterranean.

A long period of **statelessness** is the second factor. After emerging as a powerful nation in the ninth century and losing its statehood in the thirteenth century, the country became part of various states and subsequent empires, but surprisingly, the community did not break up, was not assimilated, and retained its unity. In recent centuries, most of Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire, and then all of Ukraine was part of the Soviet Empire, these events shaping a specific stateless society. This society could not rely on a long-standing tradition like the one that allowed Poland to recover in 1918 after more than 120 years of statelessness, or even on a single generation of statehood like the Baltic States enjoyed between the two World Wars. For Ukrainians, statehood was something ancient and semi-mythical against the background reality of a foreign state – imperial, occupying, hostile. Trusting the State almost always meant loss – loss of property, freedom or life. Instead, society was built on strong horizontal ties.

The combination of frontier and statelessness gave rise to what Ukrainian journalist and current soldier in the Armed Forces of Ukraine Pavlo Kazarin

1 Serhiy Hromenko et al. *Ukrainian Multifrontier*. Fabula, Kharkiv, 2024.

called the 'Wild West of Eastern Europe',[2] drawing parallels with the American frontier.

The third factor in the genesis of modern Ukraine is the fact that Ukrainian society is not only post-colonial, but also **post-genocidal**. Unlike the maritime empires of Europe, whose remote colonies were populated by people of other races, and the multi-layered land-based Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian/Soviet Empire had an assimilatory character. Vienna never tried to turn everyone into Germans, while Moscow tried to make everyone the same and continues doing so to this day. The playbook is classic: exterminate part of the population, bring in already assimilated people from other regions to replace them, kill the elite (officers, artists, scientists, priests), limit the functioning of language and culture while encouraging the rest of the population to passively copy their oppressors (and then mobilise them to conquer the other lands). The modern history of Poland, from the anti-Russian uprisings to Katyn, provides many examples of these imperial mechanics.

Europe experienced two World Wars in the 20th century, but otherwise was able to develop in relative peace and calm. For Ukraine, however, the entire century was a tumultuous one: the Bolshevik conquest, the Red Terror, the Holodomor of 1932–1933, the Executed Renaissance, the man-made famine of 1946–1947, Chornobyl, and other less known but no less tragic events, along with the wars, encompass generations, leaving each of them traumatised. A number of Holocaust events also happened in this territory. In Europe, more or less normal life was punctuated by catastrophes, while Ukrainians lived under endless pressure and therefore experienced a chronic lack of security for many generations, a factor that adds another layer to the previous ones.

So, there has never been a strong state on this land. The medieval feudal mosaics, fragile kingdoms, and early modern Cossack republics had nothing in common with European absolutism or Russian authoritarianism. Ukraine had been occupied by empires for centuries and had no modern tradition of state-building. Therefore, any state on this territory was primarily perceived as hostile, as an alien, as an occupier.

In Ukraine, a weak state and a strong society create an atypical political style. It is a country of balance, not leadership. No one can rule Ukraine like a king (a brief attempt at monarchical rule in 1918 lasted less than a year).

2 The title of a book by Pavlo Kazarin – Дикий Захід Східної Європи – which won the award BBC Book of the Year in the Essays category. (editor's note).

Looking at Ukraine through the Western lens sometimes hinders understanding of what is happening here. For example, on many occasions, I have witnessed Western diplomats and politicians communicating with the government, considering it the most important political actor in Ukraine, and when this approach failed, turning to the opposition, which also has very little support. The weakness of political institutions has been clearly evident at key moments in history, for example, during the 2013–2014 Revolution of Dignity, when 94% of protesters said they were not supporters of any political party.

It is not surprising that traditional sociological surveys indicate a deep distrust of all political institutions: parliament, government, the president, the opposition, and even the media. Only four institutions enjoy the people's trust: the Armed Forces, churches (which vary in multi-confessional Ukraine), volunteers (a common word for all civic networks that help supply the army, accommodate internally displaced persons, etc.) and non-governmental organisations. It is interesting that the vernacular distinguishes between institutionalised NGOs and volunteers by naming the former after an obsolete word, which in the 16th–17th century republic was used to refer to Cossacks in royal service, as opposed to self-governing non-institutionalised Cossacks.

The outbreak of full-scale war was accompanied by a significant increase in trust in all state institutions related to defence, from the president to the police. But over time, everything has returned to previous levels. This is why Ukrainian political institutions are often not only ineffective, but also have a limited mandate from the people.

All of this may seem to paint a picture of an anarchic society with no structure. But such a society is not capable of resisting a stronger enemy in a prolonged war. If Ukraine were an anarchy, it would have ceased to exist long ago. So there is something else that is not visible using traditional optics: the horizontal networks, independent of hierarchies, which are well-described by Niall Ferguson in his book The Square and the Tower.[3]

Four roles

In Ukraine, civil society does not meet the traditional definition of this phrase in the Western world. To understand this, let us start with social roles.

3 N. Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower: Networks and Power, from the Freemasons to Facebook*, Penguin Press 2018.

Traditionally, in Europe, civil society has played the role of a **watchdog**: it closely monitors the actions of state authorities, and when it sees problems, it leaps into action and loudly draws attention to them, making corruption, ill-considered political decisions, etc. impossible. Certainly, this function of civil society in Ukraine exists, but it is not limited to it. Moreover, in our country this function is actually a secondary one.

First and foremost, civil society is the main actor that develops and implements changes when the government fails. Thus, civil society is not just a watchdog, but the country's **sled dog**, pulling the sled on its own. It includes not only traditional-style NGOs, but also a variety of overlapping networks that go far beyond NGOs and, in many cases, replace weak political institutions at national and local levels. Without these networks, Ukraine could have become a failed state. More formally, this function could be called 'capacity outsourcing': failing institutions tap into the resources of civil society, which, while not unlimited, are still very scalable.

Another function of civil society is to act as a **commissioning entity**. All decisions about Ukrainian life have always been made in Moscow, both in imperial and Soviet times; despite formally having its own parliament and government, they were both deprived of powers. The country simply did not have a regular system of government decision-making, and this did not change after 1991, when the yellow and blue flag was raised over the country's buildings. Many politicians and government officials, who have no experience with public administration, simply did not know how to go about it (which partly explains the time wasted in the first decades of independence). While developed democracies have political parties and governmental policy-making mechanisms, Ukraine's emerging democracy has numerous formal and informal groups, movements, and networks that create demand for a certain kind of politics.

Finally, another specific role of civil society is to function as a **source of innovation**. The reason for this state of affairs originates in the same, rather sad reality of feeble state institutions and public administration. Civil society has the ability to massively engage pro bono experts from the private sector at a level that the public sector cannot afford due to low salaries, backward culture, and low levels of trust. Thus, when the public sector needs an innovation, it usually comes from civil society.

One of the reasons for the rapid development of civil society in 2014–2024 was the failure of the 2004 Orange Revolution, when the political victory of the active pro-European part of society ended with the transfer of the

mandate of trust to the relevant politicians, who ultimately failed to implement the desired reforms. That is why one of the informal slogans of the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014 was 'We will not leave Maidan this time', which, of course, did not express the desire to stay in tents on the central squares of Ukrainian cities, but in this context reflects an understanding that reforms could not be implemented without the personal involvement of active citizens, i.e. continuation of the revolution in the form of daily civic engagement.

In summary, Ukraine has a civil society network encompassing both formal and informal structures that operate independently but at the same time are well-coordinated. This increases not only capacity, but also flexibility and adaptability – which, as we will see below, are vitally important.

Achievements

Below, I will try to show how these four roles have manifested in different spheres of Ukrainian life.

First of all, civil society plays a key role **in the defence** of the country. In the spring of 2014, Ukraine's army was on the verge of collapse: decades of corruption, and most importantly, the deceptive belief that the country was surrounded by friends and therefore did not need to defend itself, had left the army small, disorganised, poorly armed, and poisoned by Russian propaganda. When Russia invaded, tens of thousands of volunteers took up arms to defend their families, cities, and the country. The situation repeated itself in February 2022: the Armed Forces were already experienced and trained, but their size was outmatched by the scale of the largest war on the continent since World War II. In the first weeks of the full-scale invasion, almost 100,000 volunteers joined the ranks of the recently created Territorial Defence (a component of the Armed Forces of Ukraine). Software developers, entrepreneurs, artists, educators, and people from dozens of peaceful professions joined the ranks. Many military units created by volunteers have become legendary, such as the Azov and Khartiia (Charter) brigades, and the Da Vinci Wolves battalion, etc.

At the same time, tens of thousands of people provided supplies – starting from 2014, when the army supply system was virtually non-existent, and again in 2022, when it was woefully unprepared to meet the scale of the challenges the country faced. This was called the **volunteer movement** (in Ukrainian, 'volunteer fighter' and 'volunteer' are two different words). In the first period of the war, volunteers collected money donated by millions

of people, bought bulletproof vests, first aid kits, thermal imagers, boots, uniforms, and food, and then delivered it to the front line. Without volunteers, many volunteer fighters would have been hungry and unequipped in the first months of the full-scale war. Nowadays, volunteers are supporting the state supply chain and taking care of those areas where the state cannot cope: for example, the supply and repair of vehicles, which in modern warfare are simply expendable and remain abandoned on the battlefield for days. Volunteer-run charities such as the Come Back Alive Foundation, the Odesa-based Monster Corporation, the Kharkiv-based Kharkiv with You association, Leleka (a supplier of medical equipment) and hundreds of others address different problems facing the military. It is no coincidence that the volunteer movement enjoys the highest level of public trust in Ukraine.

A separate, important part of the volunteer movement involves **medical volunteers** who carry out evacuations and provide first aid. NGOs such as the First Volunteer Medical Hospital, Hospitallers, Angels of Taira, and others have become legendary in this war.

Another extremely important contribution of civil society is the **development of innovative military technologies**. The phrase 'generals always fight the last war', attributed to Churchill, has come to life with extraordinary clarity. The nature of warfare changes dramatically every six months, and no government agency with its cycle of analysis and decision-making can keep up with this pace of innovation. This primarily concerns drones, electronic warfare and intelligence, and communications. Since the first days of the war, not only private enterprises but also numerous civic movements such as Victory Drones and hundreds of others have been producing innovative equipment. Only such flexible structures can withstand the pace of innovation imposed by the war against an enemy that is much stronger.

In addition to technological innovations, there are also **tactical innovations**. The new nature of warfare has not only rendered the Soviet-style army outdated, but even the Ukrainian army of 2022. Suffice it to say that technology makes the frontline transparent for tens of kilometres in both directions from the contact line, while the tank, the dominant vehicle on the battlefield of the Second World War and even the Cold War, now lives only a few hours. Everything has changed, and the army is a very conservative institution by definition. And it is very helpful, as I have already mentioned above, that people from peaceful professions, often with a high culture of management and innovation carried over from business, have joined the army *en masse*. They have contributed to tactical innovations that have made twentieth-century

tactics as outdated as medieval knights in chainmail during the Napoleonic Wars. The legendary Aerorozvidka (aerial reconnaissance[4]) has become a source of numerous military innovations.

The culture of horizontal connections transferred to the army (by definition a vertical hierarchical system) via civil society has become one of the organisational innovations that has ensured many tactical victories over the slow, more traditional Russian army, despite its dominance in numbers, military equipment and firepower.

Since the war is hybrid, I would also like to emphasise the role of civil society in **cyber- and information warfare** (including combating disinformation). Obviously, the unprecedented nature of the challenges and their scale require much more than state structures are able to provide. Since the first days of the war, the main burden in this area has been borne by civil society organisations and informal networks, sometimes sprawling ones.

To round off the discussion concerning direct civil society involvement in the war, it is worth mentioning the **non-violent resistance** in the temporarily occupied cities (where people marched against tanks with Ukrainian flags in their hands), the **partisan movement** in the temporarily occupied territories, and the **documentation of war crimes** committed by the Russian army.

Now let us look at what has happened and is happening far from the frontline. First of all, civil society has played a key role in **reducing the refugee crisis**. In the first phase of the war, after 2014, volunteers helped 1.7 million displaced people obtain first aid, food and clothes, shelter, and sometimes even jobs. This challenge could have turned into a humanitarian catastrophe, but owing to the efforts of civil society, many such tragedies were avoided. As a result, the story of numerous internally displaced persons from the first stage of the war remained out of the spotlight of European observers, unlike the refugee crisis in Syria. For this, we should thank Crimea SOS, East SOS, the Svoi (Ours) Foundation and hundreds of other organisations.

Similarly, after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, tens of thousands of volunteers helped people evacuate to other areas of Ukraine, distant from the frontline, or to Europe. The organised evacuation of such huge masses of people could not have happened without the hospitality and dedication of Europeans, especially Poles, but also without volunteers on the Ukrainian

4 A team and social organisation involved in the creation and implementation of new technologies in the Security and Defence Forces of Ukraine. See: https://aerorozvidka.ngo/ (accessed here and in further footnotes 10 February 2025).

side. The number of officially registered internally displaced persons in the country currently amounts to 4.9 million people – all of whom could have become an additional burden for European social welfare systems if there were no NGOs or networks to help them escape and settle in a new place in Ukraine. One should mention separately the evacuation of pets whose owners were unable to evacuate from frontline areas, a feat also accomplished by volunteers (for example, from 12 Sentinels).

Those who stayed in frontline territories also need attention that government agencies have been unable to provide: food, water, medicine, medical care, psychological support, etc. All this is provided by volunteers. Residents of the de-occupied territories also need help.

Taking care of the wounded in hospitals, buying and delivering medications, organising rehabilitation and prosthetic centres (we cannot help but mention the Superhumans Centre), assistance with socialisation and legal protection of veterans also constitute an important part of volunteer activities.

This war does not have a rear, as air attacks target all cities in Ukraine, near and far. This is where another civil society superpower comes into play – the ability to organise **rapid reconstruction** after missile and drone attacks or after the de-occupation of cities and villages. The old Ukrainian word *toloka* – unpaid collective labour to quickly accomplish a large-scale job – has come back into widespread use. A well-known example in the West is the immediate arrival of thousands of volunteers to clear the rubble after the rocket attack on the Okhmatdyt[5] children's hospital, but smaller and more formal tolokas are regularly held everywhere, and NGOs like Dare to Restore and Building Ukraine Together are organising similar movements across the country.

Another important war-related role of NGOs and networks is **advocacy for Ukrainian interests** abroad. Not only NGO professionals, but also those who have temporarily left Ukraine and pre-war diasporas are actively involved in this. The fact that public opinion and political decisions in Europe and North America are siding with Ukraine is also due to the public contribution of organisations such as the International Centre for Ukrainian Victory, Razom for Ukraine (Together for Ukraine) and many others.

5 Okhmatdyt (an abbreviation incorporating elements of words that mean 'maternity and childhood protection') is a multidisciplinary diagnostic and treatment centre in Kyiv that provides specialised, highly qualified medical care to children in Ukraine. It is the largest children's hospital in Ukraine.

The role of public networks in leveraging **sanction pressure** on Russia should be noted separately. Investigating the activities of Russian companies abroad and international companies in Russia, identifying ways to circumvent sanctions, and other aspects of this extremely important activity that undermines Russia's ability to wage war have been taken over by public networks of experts. Obviously, the state simply does not have such a professional staff.

So much attention has been paid to the war in the paragraphs above because the war is now defining all elements of Ukrainian life, and also because the scale of the challenges is incommensurate with the capabilities of even very developed state institutions (and we have insufficiently developed ones, as I described at the beginning). The Head of the Centre for Civil Liberties, Oleksandra Matviichuk, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022, said that in times like these ordinary people do extraordinary things. In addition, I hope that these notes will be useful to European civil society organisations in case the war escalates to their territories -- something we would like to avoid at all costs, even though the indecisive policies of Western governments make such an escalation very likely.

Now let us move on to the peaceful aspects of life. First of all, I would like to point out that Ukrainian civil society has traditionally played a significant role in **reforms**, development and implementation of necessary laws and government decisions. They joke that a true pro-reform coalition in Ukraine is not a coalition between winning political parties, but a coalition between civil society, the EU Delegation and the US Embassy. Given the way the reforms are being implemented, it is clear this is not just a joke. All significant changes have been developed outside of traditional institutions and adopted only as a result of joint pressure. Even Ukraine's most successful reforms, such as the award-winning public procurement platform Prozorro, were initially developed by volunteers (some of whom later joined the civil service to complete the implementation). Highly respected are the Public Integrity Council,[6] which plays a key role in the renewal of the judiciary, the Centre for Policy and Legal Reforms,[7] which has been developing the capacity of state institutions for almost three decades, the Better Regulation Delivery Office

6 A permanent, independent body in the Ukrainian judicial system established to assist the Higher Qualification Commission of Judges in determining whether a candidate for the position of judge meets the criteria of professional ethics and integrity. See: https://grd.gov.ua/ (editor's note).

7 A non-profit social organisation founded in 1996 that promotes political and legal reforms aimed at establishing the rule of law and good governance in Ukraine. See: https://pravo.org.ua/ (editor's note).

(BRDO),[8] which became the human resource base of one of the governments (unfortunately, for a short time), and many others. And those areas which, for various reasons, lacked specialised civil society organisations to develop, advocate for, and implement reforms remained unreformed.

The role of civil society in the **fight against corruption** is also related to reforms. Despite a well-developed system of anti-corruption law enforcement agencies, the key role of public investigators nowadays cannot be fulfilled by anyone else. The aforementioned Prozorro system would not have worked without Dozorro, a platform for public oversight of public procurement. Extraordinary civic activism in the fight against corruption often plays a bad joke on the country, leading the West to overestimate the real scale of corruption in Ukraine.

Human rights protection, care for the environment and historical heritage, cultural and educational projects (here I have to mention the Open University of Maidan[9] and the Ukrainian Leadership Academy), etc. constitute traditional areas where civil society in Ukraine is also very active. We should also mention the active community of bloggers, which promotes understanding of problems in domestic and international politics, and converts its popularity into fundraising for the needs of the frontline and assistance to the wounded. Sometimes large sums of money, urgently needed to address certain challenges related to the country's defence, are raised in a matter of days or even hours.

Finally, in its commissioning role described above, civil society often sets policy goals, principles, and constraints. A prominent example is the so-called Lugano Declaration,[10] when nearly 300 leading civil society organisations signed common principles ahead of the first international Ukraine Recovery Conference in 2022. Another typical example is the Sustainable Peace Manifesto,[11] which describes the key parameters of a just and stable peace in Europe after the war.

8 Founded in 2015, this think tank promotes medium- and long-term economic reforms to improve the business environment in politically unstable conditions. See: https://brdo.com.ua/en/ (editor's note).

9 An educational project and civil society organisation of the same name in Ukraine, which stems from an initiative that emerged during the events of Maidan in 2013. It was created to promote the creation of a high-level civil society through education (editor's note).

10 See the commentary by: K. Izdebski, *Zaufanie jako fundament odbudowy Ukrainy* (*Trust as the foundation for Ukranian reconstruction*), Batory Foundation, 10 August 2022, https://www.batory.org.pl/blog_wpis/zaufanie-jako-fundament-odbudowy-ukrainy/ (editor's note).

11 *Sustainable Peace Manifesto Never Again 2.0*, https://sustainablepeacemanifesto.org/. See also: *Ukraina mówi: #7. W stronę trwałego pokoju* (*Ukraine speaks #7: Toward a lasting peace*), Batory Foun-

It is also worth mentioning that civic engagement is an important way to counter emigration: it prevents despair and despondency.

All of the aforementioned examples are only the most prominent of hundreds, if not thousands, of civic initiatives, movements, and organisations.

To summarise, we see that the unique role of civil society in Ukraine is driven by two factors: first, the weakness of state institutions in a frontier, post-colonial, post-genocidal society; and second, the incommensurate scale of the challenges of the great war with the capabilities of even the strongest state institutions in developed countries.

Problems

This strange and strong civil society also faces numerous challenges. Firstly, it does not consist of proper institutions: in many cases, we see huge amorphous networks rather than well-structured NGOs. Secondly, there is an enormous shortage of resources: since civil society is much more active than the state, after several years of intensive work, its resources are depleted. Thirdly, not only resources, but also energy is running out. It is hard to work year after year for free, running every leg of a marathon as if it were a sprint. Finally, the most painful thing is that this huge social movement cannot change the rules of the political game, for example, by creating its own political party and assuming its worthy place in the political system, taking advantage of the high level of trust. The reasons for this sad reality are the traditional aversion Ukrainians exhibit toward politics and the aforementioned long-standing distrust of all political institutions. When individual volunteers have joined political movements in the past, they usually lose trust simply by virtue of merely venturing into this muddy swamp.

Civic activism, especially in times of great social transformation, is a marathon, not a sprint. Since not everyone has the strength to run a marathon, the right approach is a relay race with new people being tapped in to replace exhausted and burned out runners. But such constant recruitment requires a lot of effort.

In general, civil society has a lot of homework to do. Ideally, it would be good to develop state institutions to the point where they could take over a significant part of what civil society organisations and networks are currently

dation, Warsaw 2023, https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Ukraina-mowi_7.pdf (editor's note).

doing. But this is hampered both by the war and the long-standing reasons mentioned above.

In conclusion, I will state that history has shown us only two ways to modernise countries: either a slow bottom-up germination of new values across many generations, or a rapid authoritarian modernisation with a full bouquet of violence and further challenges to the democratisation process. Ukraine does not have time for the first path and cannot risk the second. Strong civil society creates hope for the existence of a third way. Therefore, the Ukrainian experience has a value that extends far beyond Ukraine.

My advice to Western politicians would be to realise that civil society in Ukraine is a direct and important participant in all processes, and if it does not have a seat at the table, the conversation will not be meaningful or successful. Certainly, it is not very convenient to work in an environment where amorphous and incomprehensible groups have both the mandate from society to demand changes and the right to veto bad decisions. The purpose of these notes is to show that such difficulties can be an advantage in times of extraordinary challenges and rapid, profound changes. Unfortunately, they have already come for all of us, not only for Ukraine.

My advice to Western societies is that your states, which were created for better, quieter times, will not be able to cope with these extraordinary challenges. You would do well to study the Ukrainian experience and start preparing in advance.

How Can We Restore Life in a Hromada at the Border During the War?

Interview with Yevhen Shapoval

What did the occupation of the Vilkhuvatka Hromada look like after Russia's aggression on 24 February 2022?

I must note that I have been serving as the head of the military administration of the village of Vilkhuvatka in the Kupiansk district of the Kharkiv region since December 2022. During the occupation, I was not present in this hromada. At that time, I was working on a project aimed at liberating these territories from Russian occupation.

Therefore, I can speak about what happened during the occupation only based on the accounts of my colleagues, local residents, and certain analytical studies. I was not a witness to these events.

The community shares a 35-kilometre border with the aggressor state. On 24 February 2022, the first columns of enemy vehicles entered the territory of the Vilkhuvatka Hromada. Initially, they moved along a single route, and later along several routes. This means that most of the Russian equipment from the Belgorod region passed through our area. On the first day, the first battle took place, fought by the border guards in this area.

Yevhen Shapoval, head of the Vilkhuvatka Village Military Administration, Kharkiv oblast, Kupiansk district, was born in 1981 in the Kharkiv oblast. Graduate of the Faculty of Sociology at V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University.
From 1999 to 2004, he served as deputy head of the Kharkiv branch of the Committee of Voters of Ukraine, a civic organisation that has been monitoring election campaigns since 1994. From 2004 to 2006, he was deputy director of the Yurii Sapronov Charitable Foundation.
In 2006, he was elected as a deputy to the Valky District Council in the Kharkiv region. He later worked as an adviser in the Kharkiv regional administration.
In 2011, he completed an internship at the Civil Service College in Singapore, and in 2013, he participated in the Open World programme in the United States, which is designed for leaders from various fields.
In 2010, he was elected as a deputy to the Kharkiv City Council. In December 2022, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy appointed Yevhen Shapoval as the head of the

Vilkhuvatka Village Military Administration in the Kharkiv region.

Therefore, the occupation began on the first day. The ethnic composition of the community is such that the majority of residents were displaced persons, mainly ethnic Russians. The 'Russian world', with all its manifestations, was met with a favourable response from many local residents. More than half of the local population, in one way or another, if not supported, then at least did not oppose what the occupying authorities were doing here.

There were no further battles in the territory of the Vilkhuvatka Hromada. For the Russians, it was a rear area, as supply routes and the replenishment of military equipment for the occupiers passed through it. There was a commandant, a representative of the Donetsk People's Republic or Luhansk, named Yasha, though this might not have been his real name. He attempted to establish some administrative institutions here. All these processes took place in the Kupiansk district, but our hromada is remote, which is why the collaborationist ideas of the 'Russian world', such as those related to the education process, reached us last. Perhaps that is why the collaborators here did not manage to implement all the governance mechanisms that were introduced, for example, in Kupiansk or Vovchansk. We are located exactly between these settlements, so these changes did not reach us immediately. In some villages within our hromada, such as the village of Rublene, there were no occupiers at all, and people never saw them.

Of course, the vast majority of teachers agreed to work according to the Russian curriculum. On 1 September 2022, the educational process was launched in all educational institutions in the hromada – in three schools and a kindergarten. Some teachers refused to cooperate, but most agreed. Now, those teachers who agreed have not been working with us for two years. I made a principled decision that, even without a court ruling, they have no employment relationship related to the educational process – whether they were cleaners, teachers or school principals. This was difficult because there were far fewer locals oriented towards Ukraine than those who were pro-Russian or neutral. The neutral ones are those who express the following opinion: they do not care about either Ukraine or Russia as long as there is peace. These people have no backbone and take the position that 'it's all the same to them.'

These people were under the strong influence of Russian propaganda, believing that Banderites and Nazis would come, start raping women and kill everyone. Because of this, in the final days of the occupation, many people left for Russia, while some eventually reached Western Europe through Russia.

At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the population of the hromada was around 6,000 people – now it is fewer than 2,000 (1,875). The territory consists of 30 settlements, some of which are currently uninhabited. Community life is concentrated in the village of Prykolotne and a few others. As for the border area, only a few dozen people remain there, and a mandatory evacuation was announced long ago.

What were the main challenges when you arrived to work there?

It was a personal challenge for me, and it remains so to this day. There is a certain critical mass of people – a few dozen individuals – who bore the brunt of responsibility for the governance process in the hromada. When I arrived, I had only my friends who agreed to work, and together we initiated all these processes. Thank God, those who did not support Ukraine fled, including the secretary of the village council and the secretary of the executive committee – another was killed by Ukrainian partisans in a neighbouring hromada. We had a group of people who were Ukrainian patriots, who formed the executive authority.

I said that questions about what happened during the occupation would be asked by representatives of the SBU[1] and other law enforcement agencies, while our task was to restore all aspects of life in the hromada. I won't boast, but we managed to do it – the community is functioning as well as possible, and the basic aspects of its operation are secured.

I am not talking about military issues, shelling, destruction, or anything related to that, but rather about the activity of the military administration. In general, it is about humanitarian support for local residents, infrastructure, or electricity – sometimes mobile communication is unavailable, but after all, there is a war in the country. I will give you one example to illustrate the mind-set of some residents. One of Vodafone's base stations was destroyed, and mobile internet disappeared in the area. The residents started saying that we were doing nothing to restore connectivity. They were not concerned that the tower had been destroyed by the aggressor. Their priorities are set in such a way that it does not matter to them that the Russians destroyed the tower, only that there is no connection and they cannot read some Russian information on Telegram. And that is difficult because there is nothing we can do with them right now, in terms of their mentality. This is a nationwide problem and a key issue for the liberated border communities.

1 The Security Service of Ukraine (Ukrainian: Служба безпеки України, romanised: Sluzhba bezpeky Ukrainy, abbreviated as SBU), is the main internal security agency of the Ukrainian government.

And what will the situation look like now in terms of security and destruction? You also mentioned evacuation…

We announced the mandatory evacuation of families with children from 24 settlements. As of September 2024, children can remain in only six of them. In January, February, and March 2024, the villages of Vilkhuvatka and Chorne were largely destroyed by air bombs – all public buildings were demolished, including the administration, school, medical centre, and the old village council building.

The last airstrike took place on 15 August 2024, killing two employees of our facility, which is part of the Kernel group (a food holding company). This facility is located in the village of Prykolotne. Three bombs hit, followed by two missiles that simultaneously struck the high school building. These were the last large-scale attacks on our community in recent months. There have been drone strikes and other air raids, but with no civilian casualties.

We are not talking about the border zone because gathering information from settlements right on the border is extremely difficult. However, if shelling occurs there, it is primarily mortar fire.

Do people still live in those border settlements?

Yes, they do. Around 200–250 people still live right by the border, spread across about 10 settlements. All those who remain have signed written statements taking full responsibility for their decision to stay. This includes villages such as Milove and Chukhunivka. In other words, they refused to leave, and technically, we would not be obliged to look after them. But of course, we do not abandon them – we continue to provide humanitarian aid, food parcels, and hygiene supplies.

What was the scale of the evacuation in your hromada?

Some people left on their own. Others were evacuated by us with the help of volunteer organisations, using our transport.

Regarding destruction, what is the situation with respsect to critical infrastructure?

Thank God, most of it is still operational. After the recent airstrikes, especially on 15 August, some infrastructure was damaged, particularly the water supply, but not on a large scale. Water is still being delivered to the settlements, and electricity supply is also stable.

Of course, we are not talking about the border settlements – there has been no electricity there since September 2022, when the transformer station was hit. Repairs are impossible because attempting them would be a guaranteed death sentence or cause severe injuries for the power engineers.

How many private homes have been destroyed or damaged?

Ninety-five cases have been recorded in the register of damaged or destroyed residential buildings.

What kind of assistance is available for those whose homes have been affected?

We have two types of assistance. The first is immediate aid in the form of building materials. Thanks to our partners and various charitable foundations, we are relatively well-stocked with construction materials such as OSB boards, planks, timber, and shingles. When damage occurs, we provide urgent support.

The second type of assistance is the E-Renovation programme. People gather the necessary documents and apply for this programme, which is divided into two categories: damaged and destroyed residential buildings. For destroyed homes, eight or nine housing certificates have already been issued by the commission to those who lost their homes. These are quite substantial sums, often exceeding the current market value of the properties. People can receive a decent amount of financial support.

What are the needs of the residents in your community – transport, communication, medical care, humanitarian aid?

The local oil production plants have stopped operating, and they used to be the main employers for the local population. At their peak, up to 500 people worked there. So, the biggest issue is the lack of jobs. Of course, we are not even mentioning security, which is the primary concern by default. But second, as trivial as it may sound, we simply need a good road connecting our hromada to Kharkiv. The current road has probably not been repaired in the past 30 years or so.

As for healthcare, we have a functioning outpatient clinic, though unfortunately, we do not have a family doctor. However, as my nearly two years in this role have shown, this is not a major problem. A family doctor from another locality visits us according to a schedule we have set. So, we have a minimum level of medical care secured. Medicines are also available, as various humanitarian organisations supply them to us.

Regarding transport, in cooperation with the humanitarian organisation Proliska, we launched a social bus service. Twice a week, the bus runs two routes, connecting our hromada with the town of Velykyi Burluk. People can access banking, pension, and other services, go shopping, and obtain necessary certificates. The bus waits for them for three hours and then brings them back. There is no official transport operator, but this solution has effectively addressed the issue.

There are no problems with food or humanitarian aid. We systematically cooperate with several foundations. Some people had not seen such an abundance of products before the full-scale war. Now, food aid is often wasted because it is repetitive – people feed it to their animals and no longer appreciate it as much. This is a matter for international organisations, which focus their efforts on hromadas that were under occupation. To be honest, there is simply too much aid here.

Not a single non-governmental organisation is operating in this area. There are no people willing to carry out any projects, whether in cooperation with the authorities or independently – for example, to build a playground, create a mural, or do something else creative. There are simply no such ideas. This is not surprising, considering that this territory has always been regarded as pro-Russian.

It was first the electorate of the Party of Regions and later of Viktor Yanukovych. Initiatives that actively developed in the Kharkiv region, particularly in areas located slightly further west, faced enormous challenges here. So, it is no surprise that there are no such initiatives that I, as the head of the military administration, could support for the common good. This is a challenge for me because I see that it needs to be developed, but to be honest, there is neither enough time nor a sufficient number of people who are professional enough to engage the local youth in any progressive initiatives.

To sum up – security, jobs, roads, communication – that's everything...

You mentioned that there are settlements where the mandatory evacuation of children was not enforced. What does the education process look like there?

We have three educational institutions: the high school in Prykolotne, which teaches children across 11 grades, and two primary schools. In total, 220 children are studying, all of them online, of course. In 2024, online education was extended to include 5–6-year-old kindergarten children to prepare them for school.

Everyone observing and analysing Ukrainian resistance asks about security – how can the civilian population be protected? To what extent is civil defence being developed?

How to protect civilians? Unfortunately, civil defence is an issue that is often overstated. There is a programme of preparatory courses for civilians, but in my opinion, it is all for show, and in our hromada, such courses do not exist. It is merely a farse – certificates are issued, but this is not real military training.

People have already developed their own methods for living in a danger zone under constant shelling. Some hide in basements, others in bathrooms, and some behind two walls. Well, I am one of them.

This is an established routine that people follow in specific situations. Everyone follows Telegram channels and the media in the Kharkiv region that report on threats.

Actually, they follow more than Telegram channels. People use social media as well. When I receive verified information, I write: 'KAB incoming' (aerial guided bomb), and everyone reacts accordingly. Formally, we have 10 shelters, including four radiation-proof ones, but those have been destroyed. There are six regular shelters in relatively decent condition. We also have a basement in our building, and when a threat arises, we go down there. People share information very quickly. That is why, in recent months, the State's role in civil protection has not been decisive. This means that people already know what to do during air raids.

But of course, no one is insured against incoming missiles that hit buildings directly. Either you are lucky, or you are not. For example, on 15 August, when a missile struck the factory where people were working, some were inside the building, others outside – it just happened. People react and follow safety protocols when they receive information about a bombing threat. Often, alarms turn out to be nothing because they are announced across the entire Kharkiv region, even when they only concern Kupiansk or Vovchansk, so people stop reacting. But when it comes to this established methodology, the residents have learned it. And it was not the authorities who taught them – real life did.

Are there any initiatives in the hromada related to the construction of new shelters?

We received two mobile shelters from the regional authorities – one is located in Prykolotne, and the other in Vilkhuvatka. The one in Prykolotne is

actually being used – I go there myself. We had some critical remarks, but it serves its purpose. We have carried out minimal repairs on the simplest shelters – full-scale renovations would be very expensive. To be honest, people do not use them very actively because these are mostly basements in houses. We are working on this and cooperating with one foundation to repair the entrance to one of these shelters. However, when the siren sounds, unless people read on Telegram that the threat is directly targeting our hromada, to be honest, no one goes to the shelter.

At the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned that before taking over the military administration in the Vilkhuvatka Hromada, you worked on a project related to liberating territories from Russian occupation.

This project is still active but classified. It is a joint initiative of various institutions linked to the Ministry of Defence. We worked on accelerating the liberation of the Kharkiv region from occupation. In the end, we succeeded, and by September 2022, over 95% of the territories had been liberated. It is a modern project, but I cannot provide further details.

What did you do before?

Before the full-scale war began, I headed the Kharkiv regional branch of the Office of Simple Solutions and Results. This was a think tank under the President's Office, operating within the framework of the National Reform Council. It was originally initiated by Mikheil Saakashvili. Previously, I was the director of a large charitable foundation, where we implemented many projects. Before that, I worked in the regional administration and served as a deputy in the Kharkiv City Council, and even earlier, as a deputy in the Valky Council. Valky is my hometown in the western part of the Kharkiv region. I have been involved in public and political life for a long time. The bullet points of my biography and education are not particularly interesting. But when the war broke out, my family and I went to my small homeland, and I worked in Valky as a volunteer. Later, I was invited by friends to join a project related to liberating occupied territories. I moved to Kharkiv, and then I was offered the position of head of the military administration, but in a different capacity – to help restore life in the Vilkhuvatka Hromada.

Interview by Piotr Andrusieczko

It Is Society That Should Adapt to Veterans

Interview with Lyubov Halan

Where did the idea to establish the Pryncyp organisation come from, and what are its main areas of activity?

The organisation[1] was founded by soldier and veteran Masi Nayyem. When he was wounded in 2022, he observed how other servicemen struggled with issues related to passing the military medical commission and navigating bureaucratic challenges during treatment and rehabilitation. He then decided it was necessary to create an organisation that would systematically address these challenges. This is how the idea for Pryncyp was born.

In January 2023, we registered the organisation, and by the following month, we had already begun our work. Initially, Pryncyp aimed to systematically improve the 'pathway' for wounded soldiers, but it now operates in two key areas.

The first area focuses on active military personnel, specifically those currently serving in the army. This means we address their needs and challenges from the moment they begin military service until they leave it.

Lyubov Halan is the co-founder and chair of the Human Rights Centre for Military Personnel Pryncyp. Born in 1996, she took part in the Revolution of Dignity at 17, while studying at the Faculty of History at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. In later interviews, she said the Maidan protests left her with a deep sense of duty to take action.
Halan became involved in human rights activism during her university years. From 2017 to 2020, she worked as a project coordinator at the Centre for Civil Liberties and was also part of the OZON group, which, among other activities, monitored police actions during street protests. She also led training sessions for police officers on public order practices during mass gatherings.
After Russia's full-scale invasion, in February 2023, Halan co-founded Pryncyp with lawyer Masi Nayyem. The organisation's mission is to support military personnel and veterans and advocate for their rights in their interactions with the state.

1 See: https://www.pryncyp.com/ (English version: https://www.pryncyp.com/en/), (accessed here and in further footnotes 10 February 2025) (editor's note).

Pryncyp was founded on Nayyem's personal experience – having fought on the front line and been seriously wounded in June 2022 – as well as Halan's background in human rights activism.

The second area concerns veterans – those who have temporarily suspended or fully ended their service and transitioned to civilian life.

Within the first area, our key priorities include military healthcare, personnel policies within the armed forces, and general mechanisms for protecting soldiers' rights in their relationships with commanders, military justice, and related matters.

When it comes to veterans, we are currently developing a state policy for transitioning from military to civilian life. We also focus on the most vulnerable groups of veterans and their families, particularly people with disabilities, as we started by working with wounded soldiers and continue this effort.

However, Pryncyp is not a traditional 'service-oriented' organisation. Our main task is cooperation with public authorities – conducting analysis, developing recommendations, policies, and regulations to change rules or address failures in the system. At the same time, we provide legal assistance to military personnel and inform soldiers and their families about their rights through a platform called Legal Navigator. Since its launch, more than 200,000 people have used it. The platform also exists as an app, and through a chatbot, users can receive free consultations.

But this is not our primary focus – we are committed to strengthening state institutions to ensure justice for military personnel and veterans in the areas I mentioned.

Who is considered a veteran in Ukraine today? In the past, we had veterans of the Second World War, Afghanistan, and the ATO[2] veterans from Donbas. How does it look now?

Abroad, our international partners typically define a veteran as someone who has completed military service and returned to civilian life.

In Ukraine, a veteran is considered a combatant, meaning the primary criterion is participation in military operations. In other words, one can be a

2 Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone (Ukrainian: Зона проведення антитерористичної операції) was a term used by the media, the public, the Ukrainian government, and the OSCE to refer to areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts under Russian military control from 2014, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Terrorist_Operation_Zone.

soldier without having taken part in combat and therefore not be recognised as a veteran.

A person can be recognised as a veteran if they have been discharged from service, but during wartime, there are very few grounds for full discharge and the completion of a military career. The only such grounds are age (over 60) and health conditions.

This means that, for example, in the event of a ceasefire and demobilisation of Ukrainian troops, all servicemen would be transferred to the reserve. They would still be subject to military service obligations and, in the event of another war, would be called to fight again – just as ATO and JFO (Joint Forces Operation) veterans returned to combat in 2022.

According to Ukrainian law, a veteran is someone who has participated in military operations, whether on active duty or not. For us, a veteran is primarily a person who has in some way suspended or ended their military service (is no longer engaged in combat) and has transitioned to civilian life. Veteran policy should be directed towards such individuals.

On the other hand, personnel policy in the defence forces should also take combat experience into account and promote the career development of those who have it, as they are valuable to the armed forces. That is why veteran policy should be implemented not only in civilian life but also within military service.

Ukraine has a Ministry of Veterans Affairs. What is missing in state policy? Why do non-governmental organisations like Pryncyp emerge to support veterans?

The problem is that for a long time, Ukraine did not have a veteran policy. There was a governmental body responsible for formulating, coordinating, and helping implement it, but in reality, this was never done. The main demand of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) during Russia's full-scale invasion was to establish such a policy.

Together with our colleagues and partners from Veteran Hub, Yurydychna Sotnia, and Prostir Mozhlyvosti, we united to develop a concept for a state policy on veterans – to define a vision of who qualifies as a beneficiary of this policy and who does not, how legislation should be changed, and what new support programmes veterans should receive.

Like all post-Soviet countries, we inherited a Soviet model of veteran support, which has undergone some modifications in recent years but without fundamental changes.

The new policy should have answered the question of the principles on which support is provided to veterans, in what form, and so on. Until recently, only civil society was formulating responses, but now the political situation has shifted somewhat.

We have a new Minister for Veterans Affairs, Natalia Kalmykova, and together with her, we are implementing this policy in the form of a strategy that was recently presented in Kyiv.

This is a national strategy for veteran policy until 2030, aimed at introducing a new vision for working with veterans.

First, it focuses on restoring the well-being of veterans, which they lost as a result of their participation in military operations.

Second, it is about national security. I believe this is the key point of the strategy. Veteran policy is part of the state defence strategy – veterans are a significant force in Ukraine's fight against Russia.

Third, it concerns remembrance and respect for living veterans, as well as a memory policy for those who have fallen, ensuring their deeds are honoured after death.

So, can we say that state institutions listen to the opinions of non-governmental organisations and civil society?

I would say yes. Although the situation has varied over the past three years, such cooperation is now ongoing.

What kind of support do veterans need most? What issues do they most often bring to your organisation?

We believe that veterans should not be stigmatised or treated like children who need personal assistants. They are adults who took responsibility for all of us. Many can take care of themselves, and the only thing they need – and must be provided with – is proper conditions for rest after demobilisation.

We see that people are extremely exhausted. The nature of combat in Ukraine is exceptionally tough, and for someone who has been fighting in such conditions for three years, it takes a severe toll on both physical and mental health. Even the fittest and healthiest person cannot endure this

indefinitely – it is an immense challenge. That is why rest, some form of insurance, and financial support after demobilisation are crucial.

The second key issue is support for those who are particularly vulnerable. Different processes take place among veterans. Disabled veterans face greater challenges due to physical limitations, which affect their ability to move freely and access opportunities. That is why their support should be addressed separately.

A great deal of discussion in Ukraine revolves around veteran employment. The job market currently faces a labour shortage, so there is no lack of available jobs. However, our concern is that while job openings exist, veteran skills do not always match market demands. Many professionals who have not worked for three years have lost some of their skills, including IT specialists and bank employees. Unlike their civilian colleagues, they had no opportunity for professional growth and will need time to regain their expertise.

I believe that healthcare is a crucial issue. We are currently in discussions with the Ministry of Veterans Affairs to ensure that Ukraine starts collecting data and forecasting the healthcare needs of veterans. This is not just about injuries and wounds but also about chronic illnesses that develop as a result of combat. The extreme physical strain of war inevitably affects overall health.

We expect that veterans will age faster than the general population and suffer from more chronic diseases, so the healthcare system must be responsive to their needs and provide adequate support. At the same time, it is essential to determine whether certain needs require additional funding beyond the general healthcare system. For example, should there be extra financial support for veterans with cancer, or not?

There is much discussion about psychological rehabilitation and access to mental healthcare, which is undoubtedly very important. However, I would argue that physical health has suffered significantly as well. It is crucial for the ministry to recognise these needs and incorporate them into its policies.

What is particularly important is that Ukrainian veterans may have to fight again – for a second or even a third time. There should be a policy of fairness regarding mobilisation, considering who fights, who works, and how many times they are called to serve.

For example, in my family, some have been fighting for the second time. How much longer will they have to fight? Will others – men and women – take their place in the future so that these veterans can remain in civilian life?

On the one hand, of course, we should make use of their experience. On the other hand, there is an ongoing debate in Ukraine about the idea that everyone should fight, which ties into discussions about basic military service and preparing the civilian population for war.

What is Ukrainian society's current attitude toward veterans?

Today, veterans are already an integral part of our reality. It is simply impossible to distance yourself from them – they cannot be ignored. So many people are now serving in the military, and eventually, they will become veterans. This affects nearly every second or third family. Everyone has a relative or acquaintance in the army.

Ukraine is already becoming a nation of veterans. And if we consider their families, then the entire society is touched by this experience. Veterans are not a taboo subject. However, there are, of course, certain stereotypes and fears. There may be delicate situations, for example, when someone returns from the front and asks others why they did not fight. Yes, they may come back and question why someone else did not serve, but that is a natural conversation.

Personally, I believe that concerns about veterans are exaggerated. I see this especially among foreigners – sometimes, they seem genuinely uneasy about it. At times, I even get the impression that they are simply afraid of Ukrainian veterans. But in our country, this has already become a normalised experience.

And what about respect – something like veteran recognition policies in the United States?

First, our war is not over yet. If we look at sociological data, we see that the Armed Forces of Ukraine rank highest in public trust.

Of course, there will always be a few individuals with inappropriate attitudes. But now, in the third year of the full-scale invasion, people are beginning to understand that everyone has a role to play in this war. Mykola from next door cannot fight alone – others must fight as well.

Naturally, discussions take place, which is normal. What matters is that we are not influenced by Russian information and psychological operations.

We are fully aware that Russia will try to exploit the topic of veterans and spread disinformation to divide us. But if we look at the sociological data, everything remains stable.

Our society has no choice – either we have veterans and an army, or we simply will not survive. Internally, we are conducting a dialogue on attitudes toward veterans. But to foreign audiences, I can confidently say: everything is under control, and we will handle it ourselves.

I am not sure if it is the right time to ask about the future yet, but what about integration policy? How can those returning from the war be reintegrated into society?

We believe society should adapt to the needs of veterans. I do not like the rhetoric that portrays veterans as sick, mentally troubled, amputees, or people who somehow disrupt normal life for others. We are working to change this perspective. I will repeat: this is a country of veterans, and it must change so that five million or more veterans and their families can feel comfortable here.

The focus should be on seemingly trivial things, such as barrier-free physical access and services. Veterans do not need a parallel system. If we look at their needs, they are the same as those of the civilian population. The only difference is the specific consequences of combat experience, but everything else is the same.

The American system has created a completely separate structure for veterans. However, I do not think it works particularly well, and often, even American veterans are not very enthusiastic about it.

Also, Ukraine will not have the money to create something similar anyway. That is why we believe the entire national system should be capable of supporting veterans, who will make up a significant part of society. For the most part, they do not need parallel services but rather well-functioning national support services.

Of course, we face a major challenge regarding access to psychological support. Veterans have different needs when it comes to restoring their mental health. Some will require specialised psychiatric care. Others – just like civilians who have been living under constant stress and bombardment since 2022 – will need specialised support from psychologists or psychotherapists.

This is about the broader psychological consequences not only for veterans but also for the civilian population and their families. Take, for example,

a woman who has barely seen her loved one for three years, constantly worrying whether he will survive. That is a terrible experience I would not wish on anyone. It is incredibly difficult to live like that for such a long time, to raise children, and to go to work.

That is why all these needs, unfortunately, are typical for the entire Ukrainian society. Veterans are a part of it and do not need any special 'veteran specialists', as our colleagues from Veteran Hub say, to take care of them. They simply need regular state services that function properly.

On the one hand, there is state policy; on the other, organisations like yours. More broadly, what role do civil society, local authorities, and businesses play in veteran-related issues?

The needs are enormous. I often compare this to the evacuation of Allied forces from Dunkirk,[3] where large warships, merchant vessels, small yachts, and fishing boats all played a role. We need the same kind of collective effort here. That is why cooperation between civil society, businesses, and government authorities is the only path forward.

There are issues that should be addressed collectively. For example, I tell business owners: if you want to support veterans, cover the cost of their dental care or other medical expenses. It is crucial that you help shoulder part of the financial burden that the state should be covering.

We worry about whether the world will continue to support us or if we will be left alone to bear the financial strain of social welfare. If businesses, as they have for the past three years, can continue tightening their belts and supporting this sector, it will be extremely important.

The civil sector collaborates with everyone – we are all pro-state activists now, working to ensure the survival of our country.

This is a unique period in my life. I have been working in the non-governmental sector for 10 years, and now I spend half of my time cooperating with state authorities because there is a demand for our expertise. It has become clear that either we stand together, or we will not survive.

3 Operation Dynamo, May–June 1940.

Humanitarian Aid Needs Change. The Organisation that Evacuated Over 100,000 People

Interview with Yuliya Krasilnykova

What is the story behind creating East SOS, and how did the priorities of your activities change over the following years?

The foundation[1] was established in response to the events of 2014, when most of the team consisted of Maidan activists from Luhansk. These were people from the NGO Progress, which had been working in Luhansk even before Maidan. There were also activists from Crimea from the Human Rights Centre Diia. We were forced to leave, to abandon our home regions, as activists and those publicly supporting Ukraine were being persecuted at the time. Out priority was to help those who had not yet left the occupied territories, whose lives, and the lives of their families, were at risk due to their pro-Ukrainian activities in the region.

The situation was changing rapidly, and more people were fleeing the war. Our organised efforts began with a hotline and, most likely, some fundraising to help people leave – covering travel costs, purchasing tickets, and so on. We provided information on how to evacuate

Yuliya Krasilnykova is Executive Director of the East SOS Foundation, born in 1990 in Luhansk Oblast. She graduated in Ukrainian philology from Taras Shevchenko University in Luhansk, and has worked in the city's civic organisations since 2009. She participated in the Luhansk Euromaidan rallies and pro-Ukrainian demonstrations during the so-called Russian Spring in 2014 in eastern Ukraine.
For security reasons, she was forced to leave Luhansk along with other activists. In the spring of 2014, she was among the co-founders of the East SOS organisation, initially focused on assisting refugees from the occupied territories of Luhansk Oblast and later Donetsk Oblast.
Over the following years, the organisation expanded its activities. In addition to humanitarian aid, it conducted monitoring of the situation along the demarcation line in Donbas. Before the Russian occupation in 2022, the East

1 See: East SOS, https://east-sos.org/en/.

SOS headquarters in Sievierodonetsk was well known to Ukrainian and foreign journalists working in eastern Ukraine.
After the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, the East SOS Foundation expanded its activities nationwide, primarily supporting those affected by the war. It is now one of the largest organisations of its kind in Ukraine.

safely, especially after trains stopped running, leaving people uncertain about which routes to take to avoid coming under fire.

We gathered this information through our extensive network of contacts in the region. It was not easy, but we were likely the only reliable source for people seeking updates on the situation in Luhansk Oblast. At the time, verified information in the media was scarce.

Later, we organised extensive humanitarian aid efforts and gradually expanded. We launched monitoring and educational initiatives, working with schools and civil society activists, primarily in Luhansk Oblast and, to some extent, in Donetsk Oblast. We also introduced legal and psychological assistance.

Prior to the full-scale invasion, our foundation completely shifted away from humanitarian aid, focusing instead on development needs. Our primary area of work at that time was education, where we implemented the most projects, along with initiatives supporting civil society and local governments.

However, with the invasion in 2022, we found ourselves back at square one. We began on 24 February, though we had already begun collecting donations earlier, anticipating that something was about to happen. We also launched fundraising campaigns in Europe with our partners. On 24 February, we activated a helpline and immediately began receiving calls for emergency assistance, including requests for humanitarian aid, medicine, and evacuations. At the same time, we sought out people in the war zone who were willing and able to help those who remained.

In 2022, we engaged in extensive humanitarian efforts. We established a call centre for evacuation requests and began organising evacuations ourselves. This was a new experience for us. Previously, our evacuation efforts had been limited to isolated cases, as in 2014, we lacked the capacity to carry them out systematically. Additionally, we launched legal and psychosocial support services.

Our humanitarian aid efforts have now decreased once again, but they are more targeted. We focus on addressing needs that no one else is covering, handling complex requests that standard international foundations – such as those running food box distribution programmes – are unable to fulfil.

Now, there is less humanitarian aid again, but it is more targeted. We focus on addressing needs that no one else is covering, handling complex requests that standard international foundations, such as those running food box distribution programmes, are unable to fulfil.

What kinds of specific assistance requests do you receive?

It could be, for example, equipment for the administration. There have been many such cases, especially in territories liberated from Russian occupation, where in *hromadas* the Russian military took or destroyed everything. Local administrations did not even have computers to carry out any work and help residents.

One request we received was for help in purchasing a hearse – something we have not yet managed to organise. In frontline areas under shelling, people, especially the elderly, have begun dying from illnesses due to stress and the immense strain on their bodies. The *hromada* faced difficulties in burying the deceased, as they had only one delivery vehicle, which frequently broke down, making it nearly impossible to meet growing needs.

We provide significant support to the State Emergency Service, purchasing equipment such as underwater demining tools, electronic warfare systems for drone protection, drones, special boots for mine clearance and other similar items.

That must require substantial funds.

Yes, we are talking about enormous sums, and we rarely manage to receive them directly from donors for such projects. These are mainly funds we raised back in 2022 and 2023 – donations both from abroad and collected in Ukraine.

Are you still collecting donations?

Yes, but these have decreased significantly. However, we are working to develop this area and are currently looking for people within the foundation to take on this task. In Ukraine, there is no strong tradition of donating to humanitarian funds – people tend to prioritise military needs. However, civilians also face enormous unmet needs.

Communication with organisations and grant-awarding institutions is becoming increasingly difficult. At the same time, funding is decreasing while needs continue to grow.

During the evacuation from Pokrovsk in September 2024, the situation was an absolute disaster because, before the town was abandoned, we had no place to resettle people. The state is unable to provide accommodation for evacuees. For the most vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and the sick, particularly those with limited mobility, suitable facilities simply do not exist.

Creating these places requires to major renovations and the establishment of new care facilities for the elderly. This demands enormous financial resources, but no one is providing them. For donors, the issue is either difficult to comprehend or lacks appeal, making it extremely challenging to secure funding.

I remember East SOS trying to develop a network of temporary shelters for evacuated people.

Yes, we support such places, provide them with equipment, and assist with minor renovations, such as installing a bathroom with a shower. There are often cases where people arrive at state-organised resettlement sites only to find that there is nothing there.

A government-organised evacuation to Kirovohrad Oblast recently took place. People received legal consultations from our lawyers, and one of them gave her phone number to an evacuee. That person later called her from the resettlement site in distress, crying. It turned out they had been taken to a remote village, a two-hour drive through rough terrain, with no bus connections. It was an abandoned school with dire conditions – an outdoor toilet, no shower, no kitchen, nothing. Thirteen people ended up living there, including an elderly woman with limited mobility and a child. Honestly, I cannot imagine how anyone could leave people in such conditions. If they had not called us, they would likely have continued living there or found a way to return home under shelling. We try to support such places, but we primarily focus on people with limited mobility, as there are simply no accommodation options available for them.

What is the scale of your evacuations?

By now, the number of people evacuated is likely around 100,000 or more, including over 10,000 individuals with limited mobility. These figures refer specifically to our operations or joint actions with partners. At present, we evacuate around 300 to 400 people with limited mobility per month. This is a significant number, comparable to what we managed in the spring of 2022. Later, the pace slowed down, the process became more organised, and there

was more time to prepare destinations for evacuees. Now, however, the flow is overwhelming.

How many teams and people are involved in evacuations?

Our evacuation team operating directly in the frontline zone consists of about 30 people. The entire team, however, is around 260 people. But besides the evacuation team, we also have lawyers, social workers, psychologists, and the humanitarian department, who work at our transit point in Pavlohrad, where all evacuees from Donetsk Oblast are currently arriving. So, it's not just these 30 people involved in evacuations – in reality, almost the entire team is working on it.

Two hundred sixty people working in the foundation is a large number. Who are they? Do they volunteer, or do you recruit them?

It varies. Right now, we are actively recruiting, but part of our team – our backbone: our coordinators and key personnel – are volunteers from 2022, when we relocated to Uzhhorod and enlisted volunteers for our helpline. Many of them stayed and now work in different roles.

These are people from various regions, depending on where we need specific specialists. We have offices in Uzhhorod and Kyiv, and then there are our field bases. The teams in Uzhhorod and Kyiv consist of 30 to 40 people. The rest are working on the ground.

When I travelled with you in 2023, you showed me a new space for women with children that you opened in Kharkiv. Are you still expanding the network of such places?

Yes, we are expanding, but we have reformatted them because the focus on women and children was, at some point, a requirement from a donor. Now, these places are becoming regional centres where services are provided to anyone in need, without restrictions based on category, with a particular focus on working with women, but not exclusively.

At present, we have six such centres – in Cherkasy, Kropyvnytskyi, Vinnytsia, and cities in the frontline zone – Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, and Mykolaiv. During one of the Russian glide bomb attacks on Zaporizhzhia in September, our facility suffered some damage.

These locations are also important because we use them for rapid response operations in these regions. They become our logistical hubs, where we deliver humanitarian aid and stay when we arrive to respond to emergencies.

That was the case when the Russians destroyed the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant. The centre in Mykolaiv proved to be very effective at that time – volunteers came there, stayed, distributed humanitarian aid, and evacuees from flooded areas also found shelter there. Now, the facility in Dnipro is operating in the same way. Our people go to help evacuees in Pavlohrad and stay at the centre in Dnipro. Earlier, there was a similar situation in Kharkiv when people were evacuated from Vovchansk – we also used the space in Kharkiv.

East SOS began its work as a hotline. Is this activity still important?

Yes, but now our hotline operates completely differently. Previously, it was purely an informational service – we gathered information on where aid was available in a given region, whom to contact, and how to leave. Now, our hotline primarily handles evacuation requests. This is one of our top priorities. The hotline supports the entire evacuation process – from the initial request that someone needs to be taken, to contacting their relatives, determining where they can be relocated, assessing their condition, and deciding whether medical evacuation is needed or if they can be transported by regular means.

We also have a database of partners and organisations operating across the country, and we share this information with people. Additionally, it serves as an internal monitoring tool. Later, we call those who reached out to us and ask whether they received the services they requested.

You also mentioned legal support. What do the legal consultations usually concern?

Many questions concern the renewal of documents and various types of financial assistance – issues some people have never dealt with before. When someone is displaced, they must obtain an internal refugee certificate, apply for state or non-state financial aid, and restore lost documents. Many individuals never had basic documents in the first place, as they had lived in their villages for years without needing them. This also includes restoring pensions or applying for compensation for destroyed or lost housing.

Document renewal is crucial. People who have nowhere to go, especially those with limited mobility, stay in our transitional shelter, where space is very limited. If we don't send these people elsewhere – to government facilities or abroad – we won't be able to evacuate new individuals. As a result, a queue forms, and the evacuation process grinds to a halt. But for a person to move on – either abroad or to a state facility – they must have all their

documents. Without documents – as strange and terrifying as it may sound – the state will not accept them, and they must remain in volunteer shelters until non-governmental organisations help restore their documents.

How great is the need for psychological assistance?

The need is significant. The condition of current evacuees, most of whom lived in Donetsk Oblast, is extremely poor. They are deeply traumatised because they have lost their sense of self-preservation and their understanding of danger. Some have completely lost basic reflexes, and if they have now decided to leave, it likely means they endured an absolute catastrophe. Something very serious must have happened. Some witnessed their loved ones being killed by shelling right before their eyes. These are severe crisis conditions, and support is urgently needed.

People often don't realise how much they need psychological help. At the transit point in Pavlohrad, our psychologist does not simply approach people and say, 'I am a psychologist, let me provide you with psychological support.' Instead, he observes them, assesses their condition, initiates conversation, and works to stabilise them. He then identifies those who respond and continues supporting them remotely or at their place of shelter.

You mentioned humanitarian aid has taken a back seat. However, when we visited liberated territories in 2023, your teams were actively helping to rebuild residential buildings. Is that work still ongoing?

Reconstruction is a separate area of activity, though it remains relevant. Our work in the Izium district and other areas of Kharkiv Oblast continues. While we were also actively working in Donetsk Oblast, we are now uncertain about the next steps; our work in this area is not about rapid response – such as temporarily covering a broken roof or window with plastic sheeting. Instead, we organise proper roof repairs and window replacements. But now, the areas where we had planned to work are under artillery fire and airstrikes by Russian forces, making such efforts pointless.

We are now considering working in Mykolaiv Oblast, where communities also need reconstruction.

You remarked that international cooperation is becoming increasingly difficult. Is this simply a result of the prolonged war and a certain fatigue among foreign organisations and donors, or is it something else?

It is a multifaceted issue. On the one hand, it is indeed a consequence of the long-lasting war and the loss of focus that was previously on Ukraine. It is

also a matter of funding cuts for various reasons. Each country has its own circumstances, but they had previously allocated significant resources to aid Ukraine. It does not seem like the war will end tomorrow, and these countries are not seeing an increase in funds. Naturally, everyone is considering what to do next and whether they have the resources to invest further.

This relates to how international organisations operate in Ukraine. When large amounts of funding started flowing into Ukraine, major donors were reluctant to provide funds directly to Ukrainian foundations. Instead, they channelled the money through international organisations, which then either distributed them to Ukrainian organisations or transferred it to other international organisations that, in turn, allocated it to those actually working on the ground and providing aid in Ukraine.

This added multiple layers, resulting in a significant portion of the funds being spent on the administrative costs of these international organisations, which, in reality, do not provide aid themselves. The only thing they do is transfer funds from donors to Ukrainian organisations, which then implement the actual projects. There is a particular dynamic in working with such organisations, as they often impose requirements decidedly stricter than those set by the donor. This is a major problem – sometimes it feels like providing aid is impossible because you have to spend the entire day compiling paperwork, producing paperwork for other paperwork, and event inventing non-existent documents just because an international organisation demands it.

An interesting process is currently underway. Since 2022, we have been talking a lot about localisation – about the need for funds to go directly from the donor to the organisation implementing specific activities on the ground. Changes are happening, and some major donors have started approaching Ukrainian organisations and trying to implement their first direct grants.

We have experience with the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with which we are running one project through an international organisation and another as a direct grant.

It is astonishing how different these situations are. Where there is a direct grant, everything is clear, we receive quick responses and funding, we have a reasonable contact person, and we are not asked for any additional procedures or made to follow unnecessary reporting requirements.

But where this happens through an international organisation, our work has almost come to a halt. There is constant interference in our work, including

attempts to dictate how we should operate and treating our employees as if they were staff of the international organisation.

The same issue applies, for example, to cooperation with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). We receive a direct grant that works perfectly – we understand how it should function, what kind of reporting is required, and we have no problems with it. But we also receive a grant from USAID that was passed on to an international organisation, then from that organisation to another one, and ultimately to us. That is simply a disaster. For example, we go three months without paying our staff because a tranche is delayed somewhere – someone hasn't reviewed a report, hasn't submitted a request for funds on time, and we have to explain to our field workers why they are not getting paid and how they are supposed to survive without money.

That is why it is so important that this shift has begun, and I truly hope that donors will continue it, placing greater trust in local organisations – because it genuinely makes sense.

Your extensive experience means you are surely observing what is happening with aid for Ukraine. Are there discrepancies between the actual needs and assistance provided by various organisations? Are some forms of aid now entirely unnecessary, while other things are more important?

Yes, a serious discussion is under way, and I am glad it has reached the ministerial level, particularly the Ministry of Reintegration. However, it is unfortunate that plans are in place to abolish this ministry.

The most important question is: why do people not leave the frontline areas in time? Why do they return? Even now, despite the evacuation to Pokrovsk we see people going back.[2]

There are many organisations helping people on the front line. The people living there have filled their homes to the ceiling with boxes of humanitarian aid. They know that if they stay in Pokrovsk or Myrnohrad, an international organisation will come once a week and give them a box of food. They do not have to pay for housing or utilities. They have no expenses while various kinds of aid get delivered regularly to their homes. Meanwhile, when they leave for places like Kropyvnytskyi or Vinnytsia, no one helps them

2 In September 2024, the front was already very close to Pokrovsk, and the city had largely been destroyed by shelling and bombings.

there. They live in shelters under terrible conditions, have no jobs, and often have to pay for utilities in these shelters or rent an apartment – which, nowadays, is very expensive.

They are unable to quickly enrol their children in kindergarten or school so they can look for work. In reality, no one helps evacuees. And this is a major problem because all humanitarian organisations are now focused solely on working and providing aid within the frontline area. That's it. The aid does not extend beyond that, so when a person leaves the shelling zone and reaches a safe place, they have no money and no support. As a result, they return home, come under fire again, and may be killed there. Many then request evacuation once more. We end up transporting them back and forth several times.

Recently, there was a lot of discussion about the fact that some categories of people in frontline areas were being given UAH 21,000 for firewood for the winter. But to receive it, they had to stay in those dangerous areas and prove they lived there. People in the process of evacuation heard about this and returned home to claim the UAH 21,000. And these are the kinds of completely misguided policies we see – on the one hand, we are trying to save lives, because that is the most important thing. On the other hand, we don't know what to tell people, because it seems they will receive support at home, while no aid is available in Rivne, Vinnytsia, or Cherkasy. It is hard to tell someone that they must leave for an unfamiliar place and survive there without any support from the state or international organisations.

Why do most aid organisations focus on the frontline zone?

They rely solely on international humanitarian law without attempting to analyse how it actually affects processes and people. In doing so, they effectively block evacuations and put people at risk.

International law is based on the belief the priority is to help those in the worst situations. Clearly the people on the frontline are in the worst situation. However, these organisations are not involved in evacuations. Instead, they send truckloads of humanitarian aid to the frontline zone, exposing their own workers to danger. We see such cases with the Red Cross, whose convoys have recently come under fire several times, resulting in casualties among their staff. Recipients who go to collect this aid face the same danger.

So the issue is that they are unable to pause, assess the actual situation, and consider whether they are acting correctly or if they should be taking different actions to help get people out of danger.

How does cooperation between aid organisations, the state, and local authorities look? I ask also because East SOS opposed the abolition of the Ministry of Reintegration.

This is a major challenge for us right now because we have put a great deal of effort into building effective communication and cooperation with authorities from the ground up – both at the local government level and within ministries. We reached a stage where, thanks to direct contacts, we could resolve many issues in a short time.

For example, in the case of the shelter in Kirovohrad Oblast that I mentioned earlier, a person called in distress over the terrible conditions. Our advocacy manager sent photos of the shelter to a coordination chat, described the situation, and that same evening, all the residents were relocated. They were asked where they wanted to go, transported accordingly, and provided with accommodation in the regions they chose.

Then that same person called us back to thank us and said they had received perfect conditions. This was made possible by the coordination chat where the Minister of Reintegration, representatives of regional administrations, and social services are directly present. They are the ones who make decisions and implement them on the ground. Everything is coordinated and it works. However, this stems from meticulous efforts by the civic sector since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

For example, we faced challenges in Donetsk Oblast, where the local administration initially ignored us and refused to cooperate effectively. This changed after Minister Iryna Vereshchuk emphasised in the coordination centre that working with non-governmental organisations was essential due to the tangible results it delivered. Eventually, the head of Donetsk Oblast called us and established that cooperation. It was a truly effective tool. Now, we are very worried that all these mechanisms will stop working. I don't know what lies ahead.

Evacuation processes will most likely be transferred to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. It remains unclear how this will impact evacuation efforts, but it is likely to have a negative effect, causing significant setbacks in procedures that have been carefully developed over the years.

You had challenges in cooperating with the authorities in Donetsk Oblast. How does the situation compare in other regions? One might assume that working with local governments would be easier.

It should be, but the human factor always plays a significant role. We have experience in evacuations and the necessary resources, such as vehicles and fuel, allowing us to provide assistance. However, effective cooperation requires mutual understanding and coordinated action. However, personal issues can get in the way and a particular oblast may refuse to engage in this dialogue, which directly affects people's lives. We cannot work effectively when obstacles arise, such as additional verification at checkpoints.

There are individuals we refer to as 'reckless volunteers' who operate independently. They have a car and a desire to help, so they go to Donetsk Oblast and evacuate someone. However, due to a lack of coordination, they often do not know where to take the people they rescue.

We have excellent cooperation with local authorities in Sumy Oblast. Cooperation also worked very well in Kharkiv Oblast when we went to Vovchansk. This approach works best when there is recognition that NGOs are not an obstacle but a valuable support, that their input is worth considering, and that their years of continuous experience in evacuations bring expertise. When this understanding is in place, we can carry out our work effectively.

Interview by Piotr Andrusieczko

Ukraine Is Not a Corrupt Country but a Country That Fights Corruption

Interview with Viktor Nestulia

I would like to start by asking about your professional experience. From what I have found online, you began your career in the non-governmental sector. Could you tell us a bit about yourself?

I worked for one of the largest American investment funds. I was responsible for risk analysis in corporate procurement. After the Revolution of Dignity, I joined the team at the Ministry of Infrastructure.

While working in the government, as part of one of the Open Government Partnership[1] initiatives, I became acquainted with Transparency International Ukraine,[2] a civil society organisation focused on corruption, which was one of the initiators of the OGP committee. I moved there because, at that time, the Prozorro initiative was launching, now known as the national electronic public procurement system. At Transparency International, I was responsible for this system, later for Prozorro Market and eHealth – major reforms that were essentially initiated by civil society and implemented as large-scale transformations.

Viktor Nestulia, head of the DREAM Project Office, was born in 1989 in Poltava. He began his professional career working for an American investment fund, where he was responsible for risk management in corporate procurement.
After the Revolution of Dignity, he moved to the Ministry of Infrastructure and later joined Transparency International Ukraine. There, he was involved in implementing major projects related to public service reforms, including the creation of the Prozorro public procurement platform and the eHealth electronic system, which automates the registration and management of medical services.
He was the first acting director of the State enterprise Medical Procurement of Ukraine, established in 2018, which handles the centralised procurement of medicines, medical equipment, and supplies. He then moved to the non-profit organisation Open Contracting Partnership,

1 See: https://www.opengovpartnership.org/ (accessed here and in further footnotes 10 February 2025).

2 See: https://ti-ukraine.org/en/.

which focuses on fostering collaboration between governments, businesses, and civil society. Until Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, he was responsible for the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region. Following the Russian aggression, he shifted his focus to Ukraine.
He is one of the initiators of a major reform known as DREAM – the national reconstruction management ecosystem. As its creators emphasise, DREAM establishes a single digital pathway for reconstruction projects, ensuring their transparent and effective implementation at national, regional, and local levels.

Then I joined the team at the Ministry of Health and became the first acting director of the National Agency Medical Procurement of Ukraine. This is a centralised procurement organisation that currently handles all medical procurement in the field of medicines and medical equipment. I was the one who established this state enterprise. Later, I did not participate in the competition for the director's position and moved to the international non-profit organisation Open Contracting Partnership,[3] where I continue to work to this day.

Before the full-scale war, I was responsible for the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region. The vast majority of projects were carried out in Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan. After the Russian invasion in 2022, I focused on Ukraine. Together with my colleagues, we initiated another major reform, which is now known as DREAM.

That is my background. I have been fortunate to work in big business, government, state enterprises, and both national and international non-governmental organisations.

That is indeed an interesting and diverse range of professional experiences. You mentioned the Prozorro system. What has it actually changed in Ukraine, and how has it impacted public procurement? In 2017, you wrote that corruption in public procurement still existed despite Prozorro being in place for a year. How has this changed in the following years?

Corruption in public procurement will never completely disappear, regardless of how developed a country is, whether it is the United States, Germany, Poland, or the United Kingdom. The question is how the system is institutionally organised and how effectively it fulfils its function.

The Prozorro system has fundamentally transformed the public procurement sector in Ukraine because, first and foremost, it has ensured full

3 See: https://www.open-contracting.org/.

transparency of the process – from procurement planning to contract execution, payments, and beyond. Besides making information transparent and accessible on the portal, it has also structured a vast amount of open data. In Ukraine, a large number of services have been developed, including analytical modules, risk management systems, and tools to inform businesses about opportunities. All of this has changed public procurement procedures, significantly simplifying them, improving efficiency, and reducing the time required. It has also created many opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses, as a policy decision was made to require so-called sub-threshold procurements to be conducted through the system. In Ukraine, everything above UAH 50,000 must go through a competitive tendering procedure. In practice, many contracting entities apply this procedure even for much smaller purchases, at levels as low as UAH 10,000 or 20,000.

These are unprecedentedly low thresholds, which have encouraged many small and medium-sized businesses to join Prozorro. If we look at participation statistics, nearly 300,000 companies and individual entrepreneurs are currently engaged in procurement through Prozorro.

In comparison, similar approaches in European countries often set mandatory competitive procedure thresholds at around EUR 40,000. For those adhering to European thresholds under EU directives, the amount is EUR 133,000.

As a result, Ukraine has opened a significant number of procurement opportunities for businesses, and over time, Prozorro has started to change the overall approach. Now, for example, Prozorro Market is being actively used for public procurement. It is an electronic catalogue where contracting entities make purchases similarly to Rozetka,[4] with standard specifications. You simply enter, click, select, and the contract is generated automatically and signed within two days. Its execution takes an average of 7–10 days, making it a super-fast process.

Of course, many abuses still exist within the procurement system, but this is not an issue of the electronic system itself, but rather a matter of culture, the effectiveness of law enforcement, and oversight bodies. If we look at the activities of the National Agency of Medical Procurement of Ukraine, in 2023, it conducted purchases at almost half the cost compared to European countries. This is remarkable – contracts are executed, orders are delivered and implemented. Ukrainian Post also makes excellent use of the system for procurement.

4 The largest Ukrainian online sales platform, see: https://rozetka.com.ua.

However, there are some – I do not want to name specific organisations – who use this tool not for efficiency but for their own interests. Nevertheless, projects like Nashi Hroshi[5] demonstrate that the system works because it allows those who are genuinely interested to conduct procedures effectively, while those who abuse them are exposed. From that point, the appropriate law enforcement and oversight mechanisms should take action.

To what extent does the war affect the functioning of this system?

In the early stages of the war, Prozorro was barely used for a while – everyone was in shock, and during the first few months, an exception was made allowing contracts to be concluded without using Prozorro. However, quite quickly, after the liberation of the Kyiv region from Russian occupation, most public procurement procedures began to be conducted through Prozorro again.

Moreover, even the state logistics operator – the procurement agency established to support Ukraine's Defence Forces – uses competitive procurement procedures through Prozorro. Of course, weapons are not purchased through this system, but much of the logistical and support equipment is procured transparently. Military units also use Prozorro, which is unprecedented.

On a global scale, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries suspended public procurement procedures. In Ukraine, there were exceptions as well, but here, reporting was mandatory within 24 hours of signing the contract, and payment reports had to be submitted within 48 hours of payment. This meant that within three days, we knew everything – how many syringes and masks were purchased and at what price. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, where Transparency International UK recently published a report on the pandemic, many procurement processes were carried out without any procedures, reports, or price disclosures. It also turned out that many companies were linked, for example, to members of parliament.

Such irregularities exist worldwide, yet in Ukraine, despite the extraordinary circumstances, we continue to apply competitive procedures even in the defence sector.

After Russia's full-scale invasion, you also co-founded the RISE Ukraine coalition. In your comments and interviews, you often emphasise the

5 It focuses on issues of corruption and abuses related to public procurement, see: https://nashigroshi.org/.

role of civic oversight. How important is public scrutiny and the dialogue between the State and civil society?

This is an extremely important element, especially in our context, considering the level of development of the country and its institutions. In Ukraine, when certain institutions are not yet fully functional, civil society always either extends a helping hand and becomes a co-governing force – as seen in the cases of transparent eHealth implementation or the ongoing DREAM initiative – or acts as a partner rather than just a watchdog. Preventing abuses is crucial because the transparency-enhancing methods advocated by civil society significantly reduce corruption risks associated with inefficiency and misconduct, ultimately shaping a new culture. If you do something in a dark room, your approach is entirely different from when everyone is watching. It's like eating fish or chicken. In a restaurant, where people are watching, I must adhere to common etiquette and expectations, whereas at home, sitting in front of the TV, I might eat without a fork or knife. The same applies to the authorities. If I act knowing that no one sees or will ever check what I do, I might feel free to take liberties and lose my sense of responsibility. However, when there is transparency and an understanding that a strong civil society and media are observing, everything changes. The mere fact that the story might come to light alters the entire approach to work.

Although Ukrainian civil society can act as a watchdog, it also plays a significant role in development and professionalisation, initiating changes, providing training, and supporting the implementation process.

Civil society is often perceived by the authorities as something that creates problems. For example, we raised concerns about the high prices of eggs purchased by the Ministry of Defence or the lack of drones. However, at the same time, Ukrainian civil society is often the solution to these problems – on one hand, it causes a headache, but on the other, it provides the pill to relieve it. We take on many initiatives that contribute to shaping reforms, not only through advocacy but also by drafting regulations, implementing them, and providing training. Civil society is a reliable partner that can often be trusted by both local and national authorities.

The entire civil society speaks with one voice to the world, saying that we need weapons. The same applies to budget support. When we saw that Ukraine was struggling to balance its budget, we put other issues aside, and civil society organisations began persuading the International Monetary Fund that resilience is now our top priority – we cannot afford to collapse.

You have already mentioned the DREAM initiative, which you co-created. What is it, how is it supposed to help, and is it fully operational yet?

Simply put, DREAM[6] is a comprehensive system originally designed as a monitoring or management tool for reconstruction. If something has been destroyed or damaged as a result of Russian aggression, DREAM serves as a universal mechanism to help identify needs across the country, formulate projects, prioritise them, coordinate funding allocation, and then monitor how these projects are implemented – checking whether procurements have been made, how much work has been completed, and how much money has been spent.

The project has evolved, and Ukraine has decided that since DREAM has proven to be an effective platform for coordinating reconstruction, it will become the foundation for the public investment management system as a whole. In other words, whether a facility – a school, bridge, or railway station – was damaged or destroyed by Russian aggression, it should still go through DREAM. This tool, first and foremost, improves project planning and quality, ensures proper allocation and coordination of funding, and provides full accountability at every stage of project implementation. Moreover, DREAM operates on the principle of 'everyone sees everything', meaning that everything done by any community or ministry is publicly accessible. This guarantees accountability primarily to Ukrainian taxpayers, as any resident can open DREAM and check what their local government is doing in terms of reconstruction and development projects, whether they have secured funding, and compare it with neighbouring communities – asking why the neighbouring hromada has already secured 100 million while theirs has not.

At the same time, it serves as a reporting platform for international taxpayers, as DREAM allows tracking which country and which donor is supporting a specific project. For example, I am currently working closely with Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, Lithuania, and Estonia, and if taxpayers in these countries open DREAM, they can see every project their country is supporting, what has already been built, and whether a particular project is still in progress. Thanks to DREAM, they can monitor how their taxes are being used for Ukraine's reconstruction.

We believe this is extremely important because it improves decision-making quality and, from the perspective of international partners, increases trust. The narrative that Ukraine is highly corrupt is simply not true. Of course,

6 See: https://dream.gov.ua/ua.

corruption exists, but we are not the most corrupt country in the world – if that were the case, Ukraine would have collapsed, and we would not be having this conversation in Kyiv. Our goal is to build trust among global taxpayers so that their governments can continue supporting Ukraine on its path to victory and reconstruction. Of course, we believe that one day Russia will pay for everything, but we need to survive until that day comes.

The fight against corruption remains one of Ukraine's priorities, even during the war. How much has Ukraine changed in recent years in terms of corruption and efforts to combat it?

Now I focus more on good governance. However, many of our partners' efforts and numerous ongoing reform initiatives are aimed at combating corruption. Of course, there are challenges related to the war, but there are also successes. For example, we recently passed a law to reset the Customs Office and the Bureau of Economic Security as well as implemented a reform of the Accounting Chamber. These are important steps. Even during the war, we held a competition to appoint the head of the National Agency for Corruption Prevention and completed the selection process for the head of the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office.

In other words, institutions continue to develop. At the same time, scandals still occur, such as wiretapping and information leaks from the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine. However, the very fact that these cases become public shows that corruption is not winning. The fight continues, and Ukraine is not a corrupt country but a country that fights corruption. Thanks to a strong civil society, we are not turning back from this path. If we look at the Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International, we can see that over the past 10 years, Ukraine has been slowly but steadily improving its position.

I asked about this also because when I speak with Ukrainian experts, many of whom have strong international connections, they point out that, unfortunately, some of Ukraine's partners – for example, in the United States – do not fully recognise this fight against corruption…

It is a matter of communication. Unfortunately, Russia invests heavily in promoting the narrative that Ukraine is a corrupt and failed state. If you listen to Putin's speech when he announced the invasion, he even mentioned the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, claiming that its efforts had yielded no results and that only Russia would bring order. Russia employs this narrative on a large scale.

When I worked at Transparency International, we promoted reforms that changed practices and combated corruption almost at the procedural level. Prozorro is crucial because public procurement presents the highest corruption risks in any country. This system helps improve processes and reduce corruption. At the same time, before the full-scale war, there were constant claims that Ukraine was a highly corrupt country and that more funding was needed to fight corruption. Many messages from Ukrainian civil society before Russia's invasion in 2022 focused on reinforcing the perception of Ukraine as a corrupt state among our Western partners. Unfortunately, in some ways, we contributed to this negative image ourselves.

Now, to some extent, this is changing, and I believe the RISE coalition is investing significantly in conveying to international partners and their societies that Ukraine has many excellent solutions and is a different country. For example, the Diia Summit held in Washington in 2023 demonstrated to everyone that Ukraine offers highly convenient digital services. This kind of narrative should be promoted more strongly, and here, civil society plays a crucial role in fostering horizontal connections with partners and civil society organisations that can support Ukraine in their respective countries.

What are your future plans regarding the implementation of new projects?

We need to perfect the DREAM system. This is a massive project – currently, 1,232 out of 1,469 hromadas are working within DREAM. The system already includes 17 ministries and all regional administrations, with nearly 8,000 projects registered. Through DREAM, grants amounting to UAH 4 billion have been allocated in the education sector. Now, the Ministry of Finance has designated DREAM as the foundation for the public investment management system. There are still many aspects that need to be refined to ensure the system fully realises its potential.

Alongside improving DREAM, we plan to promote Ukraine's experience in transforming the public investment management sector. When you open DREAM, there is no country in the world that has digitalised its public investment management process to such a deep and high-quality level. Ukraine will serve as an example for all in terms of decision-making efficiency and accountability. That is why we will certainly share this story with the world.

Interview by Piotr Andrusieczko

Even War May Not Be a Sufficient Vaccine for Society

Interview with Halyna Petrenko

Detector Media has been active since 2004 and was known as Telekritika until 2016. That is quite a long history. Organisations like Detector Media and the Institute of Mass Information not only monitor Ukraine's information space but also contribute to its reform. Could you tell us more about Detector Media's activities?

Detector Media[1] has been around for over 20 years, and our activities evolved over this time. Our work consists of two major, fundamentally different, parts.

Detector Media is a media outlet focused on the media. What sets us apart from other organisations in the public sector is that we have a sizeable newsroom that operates daily while also functioning as a non-governmental organisation and an analytical centre specialising in media-related issues.

We focus on three main areas of media-related work.

First, improving the quality of Ukrainian media. To achieve this, we primarily conduct various monitoring activities. Before the full-scale invasion, we monitored adherence to journalistic standards and the quality of television content. Since the 2022 invasion, this has

Halyna Petrenko is the director of the civic organisation Detector Media. She has extensive experience as a journalist and media expert and is a member of the civic council at the Verkhovna Rada Committee on Freedom of Speech. She co-authored a draft law on restricting election campaigning and countering covert political advertising. Previously, she served as deputy editor-in-chief of Telekrytyka under Natalia Ligachova. Both the online magazine and the civic organisation of the same name, founded to support the portal, have played a significant role in shaping independent Ukrainian journalism.
In 2016, the team behind Telekrytyka rebranded the organisation as Detector Media and launched a portal under the same name. Both continue the work of Telekrytyka, focusing on monitoring the media market, defending freedom of speech, and combating corruption and disinformation.

1 See: Detector Media, https://go.detector.media/about/ (accessed in 10 February 2025).

changed somewhat, as television began broadcasting the telethon, which is difficult to assess by traditional journalistic standards. It is more of a state tool for strategic communication – or, in other words, propaganda. That's why we adjusted our methodology and have been monitoring the telethon from the very beginning – examining its content, presentation, and identifiable flaws.

For example, we check whether all relevant topics are covered or if any are being ignored, assess political balance, and examine whether representatives of all political factions appear and have the opportunity to share their views.

Together with the aforementioned Institute of Mass Information, we are creating a map of recommended media to help improve their quality. We are responsible for television, while the Institute handles online media. We focus on evaluating and recommending trustworthy media as an educational initiative.

The second area of our civic activity is enhancing media literacy among our citizens. To this end, we produce a wide range of educational content. We believe our monitoring is primarily intended for the professional community, but to present its findings to the public, we need to adapt them into a different format. These include video and audio materials, which we broadcast on national television and radio.

The third area is the fight against disinformation. Unfortunately, since the full-scale invasion, this issue has come to the forefront and is probably our most important area of work, covering many aspects. First and foremost, we monitor social media, where disinformation is widespread. This effort to counter disinformation is transnational in nature because the digital space itself operates beyond borders. We are also involved in advocacy, particularly in relation to major technology platforms.

When discussing media literacy education, it is worth mentioning the annual index of media literacy that we compile. For the past five years, we have been measuring the level of media literacy in Ukrainian society. This research is highly valuable as it tracks trends using a consistent methodology, showing how the situation looked before the war and how it has changed during the war.

I would like to focus on the issue of disinformation and propaganda. Can we say that since the beginning of Russian aggression in 2014, Ukrainian

society has become more resistant to Russian disinformation, or not? To what extent has this changed?

Ukrainian society has become more resistant to the methods Russia has been using from the very beginning. However, Russia continuously comes up with something new. When it first started using large-scale disinformation in 2014, it relied on blatant fakes based on doublethink and inventing 'facts' that never existed.

In response, fact-checking organisations quickly emerged in Ukraine, launching various formats of debunking projects; they still exist today. However, my colleagues who run such programmes have an interesting observation. They note that in recent months, it has become increasingly difficult to find truly outrageous fakes that can be debunked in a way that effectively highlights their absurdity to the audience.

Importantly, we take an 'ecological' approach to this. If a piece of disinformation does not gain traction or become widely popular, we do not debunk it to avoid inadvertently helping it spread. We even conducted an internal investigation on this matter. At first, we suspected our team responsible for scanning the information space and identifying disinformation early on had become less vigilant. However, when we compared our findings with colleagues running similar projects, we realised that Russia seems to have become disillusioned with this method of disinformation and is gradually abandoning it. One could say that audiences have stopped reacting to it. From our own observations, we see that people are becoming increasingly adept at navigating media content. They are aware of organisations and projects dedicated to debunking disinformation.

We are witnessing a fairly natural process in which the number of media-literate audiences is growing. More people understand that Russia is capable of waging an information war, that it poses a threat, and that they need to find ways to counter it. However, it is not always clear that they know how to do so effectively. Some express interest in the issue, yet they do not follow programmes dedicated to disinformation, claiming there is nothing new for them to learn.

Meanwhile, Russia remains active in hybrid information warfare and is taking increasingly complex approaches – using artificial intelligence or

employing ruses akin to doppelgänger.[2] I don't know why, but this disinformation campaign involving doppelgängers has still not been defeated.

Russia acts quickly, changes its methods, and so we must find ways to educate people about more complex tactics and strategies without overly complicating our communication with media audiences. We try to do this in an engaging way, using techniques like storytelling.

Despite the fact that Russian disinformation about Ukraine has been ongoing for so many years, its evolving methods still make it a significant threat to Ukrainian society?

I recently attended an international conference of specialists working to combat disinformation. A remark from a colleague from the United Kingdom gave me pause for thought. He noted that Russia's strength in this arena lies in its willingness to make mistakes, learn from them, and suffer no real consequences. With ample resources at its disposal, it can afford to experiment endlessly, searching for strategies that might still prove effective.

How can we build a society resistant to disinformation? Is it possible to create some kind of 'vaccine' against disinformation? Is it even possible to counter it if it keeps evolving?

We have no choice – it is necessary. For example, there is a concept called prebunking, which means acting in advance, thinking about how we can get ahead of the enemy in some way. We have tried different formats. Unfortunately, over time, the term started being used for various activities, but when we looked into the research that originally introduced the idea, we immediately thought of vaccination. When you get vaccinated, you receive a small dose – in this case, you introduce a lie at the beginning. For two years, we ran a project based on this approach. We created animated videos where, for the first five seconds, we presented a falsehood – for example, that Poland wants to take part of Ukraine – and delivered it in an alarming tone. Then, we debunked that lie. The videos were short, animated, and very simple. Our idea was to invest very little in production but relatively more in promotion. We promoted them on YouTube, using the standard ad format where the first five seconds cannot be skipped. In our content, this 'virus' lasted for those five seconds that people were forced to watch, and then they could skip the rest. We ran the project for two years because almost 80% of viewers did not skip

2 *Doppelgänger* (double) is one of the largest Russian disinformation campaigns since the full-scale invasion, during which anti-Ukrainian content was published on fake websites mimicking real media outlets and then spread through social networks.

it at all – they watched the videos until the end. These are interesting mind games. First, as far as I know, scientists cannot determine how long the effect of such a 'vaccine' lasts – it is clearly not lifelong. Second, when we launched these experiments, we feared that people might misunderstand and that we could face backlash for spreading something hostile. But everything went smoothly, so we continued.

That is precisely why everyone is now trying to address artificial intelligence, as research and various surveys have shown that 12% of the adult population is aware that AI can be used to distort content. At the same time, these respondents claim they can handle it – but whether they actually can is uncertain. The remaining 88% either do not know about the problem or are aware but have no idea how to deal with it. Now, people have started thinking about this issue, training courses have been introduced, and there will likely be many more in the near future.

Once again, the issue of vulnerable audiences arises. All studies, including ours, show that these are primarily older people, less familiar with media and living in rural areas. They have access to the internet but do not have the habit of actively consuming online content. As a result, all digital efforts to build media literacy, which are conducted in a digital format, fail to reach this group. The question is what can be done for them at all?

We have a long and logistically challenging project – we simply want to reach people in person in regions like Sumy and Mykolaiv, where creative community spaces have been established. We want to fill these places with meaning and content. We will engage with teachers and young people. We will see how it goes.

We have colleagues who decided to co-operate with Ukrposhta. People, especially the elderly in rural areas, still receive their pensions from a Ukrposhta postman. So our colleagues decided to partner with these postmen because they are trusted figures in these communities, and doors open for them. In a pilot programme, they plan to include a calendar with advice on sowing planning along with pension payments. The idea is to offer something interesting to these people while also linking it to media literacy. They are also working with the police and teachers to develop creative initiatives for students.

Is the issue confined to older audiences? What about the younger generation, which spends so much time on TikTok? Are they more adept at resisting disinformation and navigating media content?

The situation does not look promising for this group either. They are often absent from nationwide surveys, which typically focus on adults aged 18 to around 60, leaving out both younger and older generations.

We conducted a separate study for older individuals and also planned a dedicated study for young people. When it comes to the younger generation, there is no hard data to confirm this yet, but our observations, as well as those of our colleagues, indicate that young people are increasingly being drawn into the Russian entertainment content space – for example, through bloggers.

After the Russian invasion in 2022, many people started switching to the Ukrainian language at home, children are being raised in Ukrainian, they use it at school, and yet suddenly, they start speaking Russian. It is not just about TikTok – there are other factors, such as Telegram bots used for arranging meetups among teenagers. And these are often Russian products.

There is an ongoing campaign in Ukraine aimed at blocking the Telegram messaging app. Is it really so dangerous in terms of disinformation that it should be banned or restricted? I ask because I use it myself – for example, I read news on the channel of the long-respected weekly Dzerkalo Tyzhnia, and I also follow channels run by Ukrainian military personnel. Of course, as a journalist, I also look at what is being written from the other side.

The problem exists, but I don't think it can be solved through bans. I like the approach where government officials and military personnel were prohibited from sending documents via Telegram from their work devices – that makes sense. I personally feel like I'm wearing two hats. On the one hand, I analyse and help shape the media, and on the other, I fight disinformation. There is also a third dimension, which is stratcom, or strategic communications, in the occupied territories. It turns out that when you combat disinformation, Telegram and TikTok become a problem.

But when you are a 'strategist' trying to deliver something to the occupied territories, Telegram and TikTok work in your favour, because not only can we not shut them down, but neither can Russia – even if it can control the servers, as in the case of Telegram. This platform has become too popular. When Telegram accounted for 12% of news consumption, the authorities could have considered withdrawing all official channels, which likely would have prevented further audience growth. But now that 80% of people use Telegram, and the government says, 'We will shut down official government pages, and media outlets should close theirs too,' that effectively means

abandoning those people to completely unverified content. In the case of Telegram, there should first and foremost be strong public education about the risks of using it as a messaging platform.

Unlike other social media platforms Telegram is unique in that it does not show unsubscribed content enabling users to follow only reliable sources.

Moreover, there is no political will to ban Telegram. When Zelenskyy came to power, he distanced himself from mainstream media and announced that he would communicate directly with his voters through social media. We have a professional joke that there is the telethon, and then there is the Telegram-athon. This means that the President's Office has either created its own anonymous channels or established connections with certain channel operators. Sometimes, we notice that a major event is not covered at all by the biggest Ukrainian Telegram channels. That should not happen unless it is coordinated, meaning someone requested that the media ignore it.

You mentioned working in the occupied territories. This is a hostile information space where Ukrainians still live. To what extent is it possible to provide informational support to Ukrainians in these areas – is it even feasible?

This is especially dangerous for journalists who continue to work there and report information, and at times, it also poses risks for the audience. This is not a new phenomenon, as we have already seen similar experiences with our colleagues from Belarus and those covering China.

Unfortunately, these problems are not easy to solve. A few months ago, I spoke with the head of Freedom TV, a channel aimed at the occupied territories and partly at Russia. I asked her if she had a Plan B in case Russian authorities banned YouTube. She honestly admitted that she did not, because there is no technological solution. I also spoke with the Director General of Deutsche Welle in Germany, and he too openly said that there is no alternative. Even the largest international broadcasters do not have one. There are attempts to develop startups and find other solutions, but so far, no viable alternative exists.

I believe that such a technological solution should be centralised because no single NGO or even an individual government will be able to develop it alone. In Ukraine's case, the military could be the source of such a solution, as we also have highly skilled IT specialists. However, the military is unlikely to share this technology with civilians anytime soon, meaning it could take a long time before such a system becomes accessible.

For over a year, we have been running a major project set to continue for another three years. While we have been active in the occupied territories, this has not involved journalistic work. Instead, we have been monitoring the information space, analysing Russian narratives and messaging. We prepared weekly reports on this for 10 government entities, including the Security Service of Ukraine, Special Operations Forces, the National Security and Defence Council, and others. Through this, we gained valuable experience. We can say that there is no issue with monitoring what is happening there, except when it comes to journalistic work, which requires sources on the ground and puts them at risk.

There are no issues with social media. For example, the Russian social network Vkontakte is accessible to civilians like us and we can use the same tools available to everyone. When it comes to proactive communication with people in the occupied territories, Telegram and TikTok are operational. There are also various security force interventions based on targeted messaging – for example, ensuring that collaborators cannot sleep peacefully. In our case, anything is permissible because there is a war. Unfortunately, technology companies and Big Tech platforms do not contribute to these efforts or develop new solutions, as they see no profit in it.

War brings various challenges, including issues related to freedom of speech. Ukraine is an interesting example in this regard. On one hand, as you mentioned, there is a form of state propaganda in the joint telethon. On the other hand, independent media continue to operate, criticising the government and conducting their own investigative journalism. This means they still serve as a safeguard for freedom of speech. So what is the actual state of freedom of speech in Ukraine? What are the current challenges and threats?

The situation is not too bad. I see it as a kind of social contract that has emerged in Ukraine. Martial law allows the state to interfere in the operations of any media outlet, including direct intervention, such as changing management or taking control. According to insiders, the telethon was a compromise, as in the early days of the war the alternative was the nationalisation of private television companies. Financially, it is a win-win situation because if the state had to fully fund so many TV channels, it would be extremely costly. Instead, part of the funding comes from media owners and part from the state. Beyond the telethon, a significant number of media outlets remain, including those considered high-quality and independent. For example, the public broadcaster Suspilne continues to operate and remains truly independent.

That is very interesting, especially from a Polish or broader European perspective.

It is simply a unique situation. We remain vigilant because if we do not make an effort, we could lose this position. As of now, Suspilne has an independent supervisory board and fairly decent funding. Of course, they do not receive the full amount specified by law, but they are not even pushing for it, as the state budget is under extreme pressure due to military expenditures. Everyone understands that making such a demand would be unfair during wartime.

How does the independent Suspilne operate? On one hand, there is a group of dedicated individuals in the public sector who constantly monitor for threats and interference, trying to prevent them in advance. On the other hand, we are at war, and it functions somewhat like Western military aid – when the West says, 'If you violate the rules of war, there will be no support.' There are certain boundaries – if Ukraine wants to join the European Union, it must adhere to a list of reforms, including media reforms and ensuring the independence of the public broadcaster. These boundaries exist as part of a social contract and everyone understands them.

When the elections took place in 2019 and Volodymyr Zelenskyy came to power, he and his team, being outsiders to the system, did not understand how it worked. They tried to break many things or simply ignored them. They thought, 'Why do we need media?' They did not understand what Suspilne was because they came from a major private television background. It took them time to grasp the rules of the game and the limitations.

Now, their five-year term has ended. My colleagues and I recently discussed this, as it is problematic that elections cannot be held – it is always a bad sign when someone remains in power longer than expected. However, one advantage is that the same people remain in government, and they have now learned a few lessons. They have interacted with civil society and understood where they should not interfere because doing so would only create more problems for them.

When it comes to the public broadcaster or independent media in Ukraine, a crucial factor is the emergence of the concept of civil society over the past ten years – or perhaps even longer. There are many organisations, and they influence what happens in the media space.

Yes, they have influence, and during every election, there is a certain flow from civil society into the government. There is much less movement in the

opposite direction – from the government back into civil society – but it does happen, although I would like to see more examples of it.

However, I want to emphasise that we should not underestimate the dangers that lie ahead. We can look at the example of Georgia, which experienced war and appeared to have a resilient society with a clear stance towards Russia. It had independent media and an active civil society that extended beyond NGOs – people who were capable of protesting in defence of democracy. et today, we are witnessing a deeply concerning situation there. This means we must remain aware that even war may not be a sufficient vaccine for society to ensure that when elections take place, no one with pro-Russian views manages to slip into power.

Interview by Piotr Andrusieczko

Culture Has Become an Element of the Security System in Ukraine

Andriy Lyubka

Paradoxes of Wartime

I would like to draw on three recent developments that explore the significance of Ukrainian culture during the third year of the full-scale invasion.

On 18 September 2024, the Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre in Kyiv announced the launch of a new digital ticketing platform. In contrast to the old system, this platform requires customers to verify their identity via government services. This change addressed the extraordinary demand for the theatre's shows, as clever scalpers purchased tickets months early and resold them online at inflated prices.

The demand for theatre tickets is striking, but what stood out even more was what happened on the first day of the new platform's launch. On 18 September, ticket sales began for *The Witch of Konotop*, inspired by the 1833 novel by Ukrainian author Hryhoriy Kvitka-Osnovyanenko, set to take place on 30 October. The performance was a complete sell-out! I want to stress this again: 800 tickets for a play to be staged six weeks later vanished within 13 minutes!

Andriy Lyubka, writer, poet, and translator, was born in 1987 in Riga but has lived in Zakarpattia since childhood.
In 2009, he graduated in Ukrainian philology from Uzhhorod National University, and in 2014, he completed Balkan studies at the Centre for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw.
He is the author of numerous novels, short story collections, and poetry books. His works have been translated into several languages, including Polish, with titles such as *Killer* (2013), *Carbide* (2016), *A Room for Sorrow* (2018), *Your Glance, Cio-Cio-San* (2020), and *A Small Ukrainian Novel* (2020). He has participated in numerous literary and cultural festivals in Ukraine and worldwide and also publishes articles on social and political issues. He is a member of the Committee for the Taras Shevchenko National Prize of Ukraine and was awarded the 2024 Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski Literary Prize.
From an early age, he has also been involved in social activism. During the 2004 Orange Revolution, he co-organised support actions for Viktor Yushchenko in Uzhhorod. In

2006, he served as an observer in the Belarusian presidential elections and was part of the advisory group for opposition candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich. He was subsequently arrested by the Belarusian militia and detained for 15 days.
In 2024, he became the director of the Institute for Central European Strategy, a think tank established in 2019 in Uzhhorod. Its goal is to 'conceptualise and promote a new strategy for Ukraine in Central Europe, aiming to consolidate this geopolitical region and integrate Ukraine into the transatlantic community.'
Since Russia's invasion in February 2022, Andriy Lyubka has been actively supporting the Armed Forces of Ukraine as a volunteer. By early February 2025, he had delivered 335 vehicles to the Ukrainian army, purchased with funds he personally raised.

The music industry offers a compelling insight. On 24 September 2024, the iconic Ukrainian band Okean Elzy announced their third sold-out show for an upcoming concert in Kyiv. They were set to perform on 11 October at Ukraine's largest concert venue, the Palace of Sports in Kyiv, which can accommodate 8,000 visitors, to celebrate their 30th anniversary. This prompted them to schedule an additional concert on 12 October. However, with demand growing, a third show was added for 13 October, which also sold out. Subsequently, the band revealed plans for fourth and fifth concerts as well. Amid an economic crisis and preparations for what might have been the harshest winter in Ukraine's history, the demand for these typically expensive tickets was unparalleled. This is particularly remarkable given that many Kyiv residents have left the city and have not returned since the onset of the full-scale war – yet 40,000 people attended the five live concerts!

The last example draws attention to literature, dispelling the notion that writers only care about books. On 14 September 2024, a new bookstore named Knigoland, part of a national retail chain, opened in my hometown of Uzhhorod. Remarkably, a bookstore was launched in a wartime provincial town of 120,000. What was truly surprising was that this marked the fifth bookstore to open in our city in just two years! After over 30 years of Ukrainian independence, we had only seen the establishment of two bookstores and one second-hand bookstall. Yet, during two years of war, five new bookstores emerged in the city centre, all occupying significant commercial spaces! Notably, this growth isn't due to state support, local government efforts, or European grants; it is entirely a business initiative fuelled by a rising demand for books in Ukraine.

The statistics from the Ukrainian Book Institute's 2023 report reveal significant trends. It shows that publisher revenue in 2023 hit a record UAH 6.6 billion. In the second year of the full-scale invasion, printed product volume surged by 73%, with the total circulation of these materials soaring by 203%. As reported by Forbes Ukraine, there are currently around 700 bookstores

operating in the country, including 60 online retailers and 350 active publishing houses.

Many find it astonishing that culture, especially creative industries, has become one of the most profitable sectors in Ukraine in the midst of a prolonged full-scale war and severe economic crisis.

The solution to this paradox is quite simple. Surprisingly, culture did not diminish or lose significance during the war, even though it is ranked after security in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. On the contrary, culture has evolved from simple entertainment to an essential aspect of human life. It aids individuals in nourishing their sanity during these difficult and tragic times, restores a sense of dignity amidst the instinctual urge for self-preservation that prevails in wartime, addresses complex questions about national identity, and unifies a diverse populace into a cohesive political nation.

Ukrainian culture shapes our identity, helping us clearly distinguish ourselves from Russian imperial culture. In summary, culture has become nothing less than a crucial component of our security framework amidst the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Destroyed Monuments and Stolen Masterpieces

War is first and foremost about destruction, so let's discuss some heart-breaking issues. Total war wreaks havoc on everything in its wake. From the very first moments of the full-scale invasion, it was clear that the Russians were not just targeting the Ukrainian army but also the entire Ukrainian population. Indiscriminate bombardments of remote towns and the destruction of civilian infrastructure and residential buildings have become a new reality in Ukraine.

It is clear that as Russia reduces entire Ukrainian cities to rubble, bombards civilians, and executes individuals in the occupied territories, monuments to Ukrainian culture and history are engulfed by the flames of this atrocity. Valuable works of Ukrainian art have been lost forever, and Ukrainian artists are being killed. Moreover, the full-scale invasion has demonstrated that Ukrainian cultural sites and artists are not merely collateral damage in large-scale hostilities; they are the primary targets of the occupiers in this war. The Russians understand that Ukrainian culture is a cornerstone of Ukrainian identity and, therefore, of Ukrainian resistance, which is why they destroy it with a particular cynicism and malicious delight at every opportunity.

In the spring of 2024, in the second year of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy published alarming statistics on the destruction and damage caused by Russians to the country's cultural and historical monuments.

As of the end of March 2024, the felonious Russian army had destroyed or damaged 1,046 (sic!) Ukrainian cultural heritage sites. This includes 128 sites of national significance, 848 of local relevance, and 70 newly discovered sites previously not listed in heritage registers. In total, cultural heritage sites in 17 regions of Ukraine have been impacted. Government data indicates that the highest levels of damage occurred in the Kharkiv (294), Kherson (136), and Donetsk (125) regions.

According to the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, the following categories of cultural heritage objects have been destroyed or damaged: 57 archaeological monuments, 294 architectural monuments, 312 architectural and urban planning monuments, 66 historical, architectural, and urban monuments, 1 monumental art piece, 7 architectural and monumental art pieces, 40 architectural and historical monuments, 221 historical monuments, 5 urban landmarks, 19 urban landmarks and objects of monumental decorative art, 21 monumental art objects, 2 science and technology architecture monuments, and 1 landscape gardening art object.

This data pertains specifically to cultural monuments, including historical sites, notable buildings, architectural complexes, and objects linked to the lives and contributions of key figures in Ukrainian culture and history, such as monumental sculptures, among others.

It is worth recalling that after the bloody 20th century, with its Bolshevik purges, terror against everything related to Ukraine, and two world wars, the east and south of Ukraine were already significantly 'cleansed' of Ukrainian cultural monuments and architectural masterpieces. Now, in the wake of the villainous Russian attack, these regions have suffered other fatal losses. In the context of the Balkan Wars, we often speak of 'ethnic cleansing.' Still, the current realities on the frontlines and under occupation in eastern and southern Ukraine make it clear that we must also speak of 'cultural cleansing' – a barbaric erasure of cultural strata. We are witnessing a cultural genocide.

The statistics on destroyed and damaged cultural heritage sites provided earlier reflect just a portion of the overall losses. Estimates from the Ukrainian government indicate that during the two years of all-out invasion, over

2,000 cultural infrastructure objects have been destroyed. This includes cultural centres in cities and villages, libraries, cultural and educational institutions, museums, theatres, and philharmonics. The most significant losses in the cultural sector have occurred in the Donetsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Kyiv (including the city itself), Mykolaiv, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions. Local cultural centres have been the most brutally hit, making up 48% of all damaged facilities.

The list of destroyed and damaged objects in various categories is striking: 929 local cultural centres, 689 libraries, 154 art schools, 113 museums and galleries, 38 theatres, cinemas, and philharmonics, 12 parks, zoos, and nature reserves, and 3 circuses. The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine emphasises that due to the Russian occupation of Luhansk and parts of Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Kherson regions, it's challenging to account for all the cultural infrastructure affected by combat and occupation. Additionally, this data reflects the status as of spring 2024, and over the past six months, many more cultural heritage sites and infrastructural elements have been destroyed. Every day of this war leads to irreversible and profound losses.

It is crucial to emphasise that, beyond destruction and damage, Ukrainian cultural heritage is suffering another significant loss: the brazen theft of invaluable art. Assessing the extent of this crime in the occupied regions is profoundly challenging, as we can only depend on occasional reports from Russian museums or cultural institutions exhibiting artworks from Ukrainian collections.

A notable example is the Oleksiy Shovkunenko Kherson Regional Art Museum. Before the onset of the full-scale war, the museum's collection comprised over 14,000 exhibits. Alongside invaluable pieces of Ukrainian art like Ivan Aivazovsky's seascapes, it featured works by Peter Lely and August von Bayer, as well as maiolica by Mikhail Vrubel, paintings by Vasily Polenov and Mikhail Shibanov, and illustrations by George Barbier. The collection also showcased applied arts and sculptures from Germany, China, Japan, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium from the 17th to the 21st century.

As Ukrainian forces moved towards Kherson in the autumn of 2022, Russian occupiers committed one of the most significant art thefts of the 21st century. They relocated more than 10,000 museum artefacts to the occupied region of Crimea, seizing nearly all items of artistic and financial value.

Symbolic Destruction

It is vital to understand that Ukrainian culture and history have suffered deep intangible losses, which go well beyond statistics. Here are a few examples to illustrate this point.

Among the most significant cultural sites that were destroyed are the Mariupol Drama Theatre, the St. Nicholas Church of 1797 in Bakhmut; the Orikhiv Museum of Local Lore of 1893; the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Arts established in 1919 in Kyiv; St. George's Church in the village of Zavorychi, Kyiv region; Slovo House in Kharkiv; the Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross of 1771 in the village of Berezivtsi, Lviv region; the Arkhyp Kuindzhi Art Museum in Mariupol; the 100-year-old Lysychansk Gymnasium; the Hryhorii Skovoroda Literary Memorial Museum in Kharkiv region; and the Odesa National Fine Arts Museum.

One of the most horrific crimes committed by Russian forces during the full-scale war was the destruction of the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol. On 16 March 2022, an airstrike carried out by the Russian army obliterated the central section of the theatre. At that time, hundreds of Ukrainians, including children, were hiding in the basement, as evidenced by the word 'children' clearly written in Russian around the building. However, this did not deter the Russians; instead, some researchers suggest it encouraged the Russian army to strike harder, leading to significant human loss intended to instil panic in the city and force the Mariupol defence garrison to surrender.

In the spring of 2022, at the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a Russian missile strike devastated the National Literary Memorial Museum dedicated to the esteemed Ukrainian philosopher and poet Hryhorii Skovoroda, located in the Kharkiv region. It's crucial to highlight that this was not a random shelling or a collateral loss from battlefield engagements but rather a deliberate attack. Consequently, flames consumed 280 square metres of the museum.

In 2022, two stunning mosaics by Ukrainian artist and dissident Alla Horska – *Tree of Life* and *Boryviter* (also known as Windhover or Kestrel) – were tragically destroyed in Mariupol. The first retrospective exhibition titled *Alla Horska. Boryviter*, which took place in 2024 in Kyiv, became one of the most attended art exhibitions in Ukraine's history, drawing 51,000 visitors. This impressive turnout reflects a significant societal response from Ukrainians to the atrocities committed by the Russian occupiers.

Likewise, the wooden museum dedicated to Ukraine's outstanding naïve artist Maria Prymachenko, situated in Ivankiv in the Kyiv region, was destroyed during four targeted strikes by Russians. Some dedicated locals, however, managed to rescue about a dozen of Prymachenko's artworks from the flames and later concealed them from the Russian invaders during the occupation.

In 2023, Russians caused the destruction of a portion of the artistic heritage belonging to another Ukrainian naïve painter. On the night of 6 June 2023, in response to concerns about a Ukrainian counteroffensive, Russian forces detonated the Kakhovka Dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station. This act led to extensive flooding across thousands of square kilometres and many settlements. Polina Raiko's memorial house in Oleshky, located in the Kherson region, was inundated, leading to the collapse of the interior walls where the self-taught artist created her works. Regrettably, the village remains occupied, making it impossible to assess the extent of the damage.

The Odesa National Fine Arts Museum, which houses one of the largest collections of artworks, was hit by Russian forces twice: on 20 July and 5 November 2023. It's important to recognise that this museum is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Thankfully, the collection remained intact because the museum staff had evacuated it to a safer location beforehand, having learned from the painful experience of Russian troops targeting, looting, and vandalising Ukrainian cultural artefacts. Sadly, however, there are currently no safe havens in Ukraine.

In conclusion, this serves as yet another instance of how Russia is intentionally targeting Ukrainian culture across multiple fronts. On 23 May 2024, a Russian precision missile struck the Factor Druk printing house, part of the Factor group, which includes publishing house Vivat –Ukraine's third-largest printing house. It was a large, modern Ukrainian printing house that produced books and textbooks for almost all Ukrainian publishers, with a market share of about 40%. With deep sorrow, I must note that this assault also resulted in the deaths of seven printing house employees and the injury of 23 others.

People of Culture Taken Away by the War

As stated earlier, Russia is systematically destroying entire cities and cultural landmarks in Ukraine, with a primary focus on targeting Ukrainians. Among the Ukrainian soldiers and civilians lost are numerous artists and cultural figures. Some chose to volunteer for military service and were

killed in action; others perished in bombings and shelling. Some Ukrainian artists are currently prisoners of war and living under occupation, while Russia has deliberately killed others, shooting them in a manner reminiscent of Stalin's purges in the late 1930s.

PEN Ukraine, in partnership with The Ukrainians Media, has initiated a special project titled People of Culture Taken Away by the War. This initiative has a dual purpose: to preserve the memory of people abruptly eliminated from the Ukrainian cultural landscape and, at the same time, to testify to Russia's genocidal crimes.

Dozens of cultural figures have lost their lives in the Russo-Ukrainian War, including writers, musicians, translators, librarians, artists, photographers, archaeologists, and conductors, both male and female. Some were public figures, while others were known only to a small circle. What unites them all, first, is that their works are woven into the fabric of Ukrainian culture, and second, that these individuals were murdered by Russia.

People of Culture Taken Away by the War features a collection of portraits created through conversations with the relatives and colleagues of cultural figures, alongside travels across Ukraine as their legacies are uncovered. This initiative was inspired by the words of writer Victoria Amelina, who tragically lost her life due to a missile strike in Kramatorsk. She personally unearthed the journal of her fellow writer Volodymyr Vakulenko, who was tortured and killed in Izyum. In the foreword to the printed edition of his secret occupation diary, she stated: 'As long as writings are read, their authors remain alive.' To date, over 130 confirmed deaths of Ukrainian artists and cultural figures have been documented.

I want to highlight Volodymyr Vakulenko, as his murder demonstrates that the Russian army regards Ukrainian artists as a genuine threat. Let me remind you that only days before the invasion, on 21 February 2022, US officials reported that Russia had created 'kill lists' of Ukrainians intended for initial elimination. The lists allegedly included officials, veterans of the Anti-Terrorist Operation[1] in the Donbas, patriotic movement leaders from around Ukraine, and people of culture.

Six months post-invasion, we realised that the execution lists targeting Ukrainians were neither fictional nor nightmarish; they were a documented

1 ATO – a Ukrainian abbreviation for Anti-Terrorist Operation, a Ukrainian law enforcement operation aimed at counteracting the activities of illegal Russian and pro-Russian armed groups in eastern Ukraine, which lasted from 14 April 2014 to 30 April 2018.

impending reality. In the fall of 2022, as the Ukrainian army reclaimed the Kharkiv region, the horrifying narrative of local writer Volodymyr Vakulenko emerged.

On 7 March, during the second week of the large-scale war, Russian troops captured his home village of Kapytolivka. Soon after, an armed faction of invaders took the writer and his young son for interrogation. Volodymyr was severely beaten, but after a few hours, he was released. He subsequently buried his secret journal beneath a cherry tree in his garden, as if intuiting that dark times were ahead. He wanted to leave his mark as a writer, so he cherished his handwritten diary, an occupation testimony.

On 24 March, Russian forces took Volodymyr away, and he was never seen again. It was only after the area was liberated that a record of the writer's burial at grave No. 319 was discovered in the local cemetery. Following this, DNA results verified the authenticity of the record. Ukrainian author Volodymyr Vakulenko was shot twice with a Makarov pistol.

Was he a threat? Absolutely not. Volodymyr was a poet and children's book author – fiery yet kind-hearted. He received multiple literary awards yet remained neither well-known nor influential. By nature, Vakulenko embodied punk culture, standing as a counter-cultural figure distanced from conventional norms and authority. Why was he killed? Because Volodymyr was a Ukrainian poet. During those despicable times, individuals like him posed a danger to the occupiers. It turns out that the Russians were ordered to hunt down cultural figures, commit genocide, and exterminate the Ukrainian cultural elite in the occupied territories. To take drastic measures against poetry or target children's books – this is the risk associated with one straightforward truth: they are in Ukrainian.

Ukrainian Artists in the Army and Volunteering

To avoid becoming targets of the Russian army, Ukrainian artists enlist in the military to protect themselves, their families, and their country.

For evident reasons, the martial law enacted in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 does not separate prominent cultural figures from lesser-known ones. Consequently, all healthy men aged 25 to 60, including numerous creative professionals, are subject to mobilisation. In the early days of the full-scale invasion, many Ukrainian cultural figures chose to enlist at the front lines, while others joined the Armed Forces in the months and years that followed. Some have taken on roles that reflect their professional backgrounds: poet

Dmytro Lazutkin[2] and journalist-novelist Illarion Pavliuk now work in strategic communications and press services, and writer Oleksandr Mykhed[3] serves in an analytical and communications unit. Others have willingly formed assault units on the front lines to retaliate against the Russians for occupying their homeland. This includes the renowned Kremlin prisoner and native Crimean film director Oleg Sentsov,[4] alongside Donetsk-born writer and journalist Stanislav Aseyev.[5]

Some artists have volunteered to assist the Ukrainian army, leveraging their visibility and connections with a broad audience. Given the circumstances, determining the number of Ukrainian artists and cultural figures who have enlisted in the army or participated in the volunteer movement is currently unfeasible. However, the figure could be in the hundreds or even thousands.

The Cultural Forces, an outstanding unit, is a full-time military organisation that gathers various artists under its umbrella. This association consists of servicemen dedicated to enhancing soldier morale, cultural awareness, and education. It is a rather large unit consisting of 71 servicemen and women. One of the Cultural Forces' goals is to motivate civilians to join the army voluntarily. The Cultural Forces also work with mobilised troops in training centres, provide psychological support to units along the front line, and assist the wounded in hospitals and rehabilitation centres. In other words, their main goal is to boost the morale of both the military and civilians.

Additionally, the unit produces anthems, symbols, videos, and films highlighting various combat brigades. The Cultural Forces host over 200 monthly events across seven front lines and in the rear, attracting more than 100,000 visitors. These concerts, lectures, performances, and dedicated forms of emotional support help soldiers manage stress and regain emotional stability. I want to introduce you to notable Ukrainian cultural figures within the military and the volunteer movement.

2 Dmytro Lazutkin (b. 1978) – a poet, journalist, TV presenter and sports commentator. Winner of the Taras Shevchenko National Prize.

3 Oleksandr Mykhed (b. 1988) – a Ukrainian writer, member of the PEN Club. Finalist in the Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski Literary Award 2024.

4 Oleg Sentsov (b. 1976) – a Ukrainian film director and writer. He was arrested in Crimea in 2014, accused of terrorism by the Russians and sentenced to 20 years in a labour camp. Imprisoned until 2019, he was freed during a prisoner exchange in response to international pressure.

5 Stanislav Aseyev (b. 1989) – a Ukrainian writer and journalist, born in Donetsk. After Russia's occupation of the Donbass, he produced around fifty articles and photo reports for Radio Svoboda. In 2017, he was abducted and imprisoned, tortured and accused of espionage. Released in 2019 during a prisoner exchange.

My first featured individual is Andriy Khlyvnyuk, a Ukrainian artist known as the vocalist and lyricist for the well-known band BoomBox. Shortly after the full-scale invasion began, he joined the military and now serves in the Special Police Forces. In late February 2022, Khlyvnyuk recorded the patriotic song 'Oi u Luzi Chervona Kalyna' (Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow[6]), which became viral and was subsequently covered by Pink Floyd. While serving, he participates in civilian evacuations, aerial reconnaissance, and drone operations. Andriy Khlyvnyuk was wounded in action by shrapnel.

The phenomenon of the charismatic poet Pavlo Vyshebaba,[7] born in Kramatorsk, Donetsk region, is intriguing. Following the full-scale invasion, Pavlo joined the 68th Jaeger Brigade Oleksa Dovbush (the 68th JBr). He writes extensively from the front and attracts large audiences to his poetry readings while raising money for his military unit.

Another illustrative story is the Ukrainian music band Kozak System, which started holding charity concerts across the country after the invasion began. Their goal was to boost morale while raising funds for cars and drones. The band's efforts are impressive – the musicians have played over 300 concerts during the war!

Of course, not only men serve in the Ukrainian army. Yaryna Chornohuz,[8] recognised for her poetry and activism, stands out as one of the most prominent voices in contemporary Ukrainian culture. Before the full-scale invasion, she served as a combat medic, and afterward, she joined the Ukrainian Marine Corps. She received the Taras Shevchenko National Prize, the highest creative honour in Ukraine, for her latest collection of poems, written primarily during the war and focused on related themes.

The story of Ukrainian culture during the war would be incomplete without mentioning Serhiy Zhadan,[9] the most renowned Ukrainian writer of our time. A resident of Kharkiv, Zhadan chose to remain in the city after the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian War broke out, becoming a symbol of its resilience. His photographs, taken in the deserted streets of Kharkiv amid the threats of occupation, inspired millions of Ukrainians to resist. His words, 'Our flags are flying over the city', became a rallying cry. For two years, Serhiy Zhadan actively volunteered, raising tens of millions of hryvnias for the army. He

6 Available in many variations on YouTube, e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kugyCrDNQYM/.

7 Pavlo Vyshebaba (b. 1986) – Ukrainian environmental activist, musician, journalist and poet.

8 Yaryna Chornohuz (b. 1995) – Ukrainian poet.

9 Serhiy Zhadan (b. 1974) – Ukrainian prose writer, poet, essayist and playwright.

gathered more than 8,000 people to his sold-out poetry reading at the Palace of Sports in Kyiv, setting a literary record during Ukrainian independence. In 2024, the writer joined the 13th Khartiia Brigade, an assault brigade of the National Guard of Ukraine. This action was also a symbolic one during another wave of mobilisation within an exhausted and frightened Ukrainian society.

Personal Experience

I want to share my experience in the volunteer movement. It happened by chance, as I had no intention of becoming a 24/7 activist or volunteer. Before 2022, I participated in various activities and supported charitable initiatives and programmes, but only in my free time.

The full-scale invasion changed that, and the main reason I engaged in full-time volunteering was the support I received from the cultural community – more precisely, my readers.

The story went like this: In spring 2022, a friend from the public sector who had volunteered for the Armed Forces of Ukraine messaged me about their newly established unit's urgent need for a four-wheel-drive vehicle, ideally a pickup truck. He shared that although they had received camouflage uniforms and assault rifles, the unit lacked reliable transportation to reach the trenches across fields and forests. Transporting ammunition and food supplies by foot took many days and proved difficult.

Since it was a relatively substantial amount, I decided to post on my social media page that I was raising money to buy a pickup truck for a soldier I knew at the Donetsk front. I shared my bank account number with those who wanted to contribute. Immediately after publishing this appeal, I received a flurry of donations, and the next day, I had enough money for two pickups!

Shortly after, I sent one pickup truck to my friend's unit and the second vehicle to another military unit. I posted a report with pictures on social media and was inundated with thousands of requests, primarily from mothers, wives, and daughters of Ukrainian servicemen. I couldn't turn them down. All the messages boiled down to one thing: My son/husband/father needs a car, and our family doesn't have the financial means for such a purchase. As a public figure, I was asked whether I could raise funds for them. At that moment, I realised that I could and should convert my literary recognition into work for the army.

Since then, I have formed a volunteer team, raised over EUR 1.5 million from my followers (an impressive sum in Ukrainian hryvnias), and purchased 310 four-wheel-drive vehicles for the Ukrainian Armed Forces. We made 50 volunteer trips to the front line to deliver these vehicles directly into the hands of the fighting soldiers instead of rear headquarters.

In this context, it is essential to emphasise two key aspects. First, the cultural community and my readers have made this possible. They regularly send donations to my volunteer account, while artists, bookstores, and writers organise events and initiatives to raise funds that support our volunteer work. Writers, musicians, actors, and other creatives often tell their friends and supporters that the best birthday gift would be a donation to aid our team's efforts. This generosity stems from their trust in us.

Secondly, this experience highlights the deep trust that Ukrainian society places in cultural figures. Since the Romantic period, Ukraine has shared a common experience with Central and Eastern Europe, where writers and other cultural agents are seen as servants of the people and the nation. This was especially apparent during the 2004 and 2014 revolutions when prominent cultural figures addressed the crowds from the Maidan stage.

The same scenario unfolded again after the full-scale invasion: I repeatedly received funds in my volunteer account from individuals who placed their trust in me as a writer rather than in government bodies, charities, or political figures. Sociological studies indicate that culture, alongside the military and religion, serves as a protective barrier that society relies on and believes in during critical moments.

Instead of Conclusions

Even amid the devastation of the largest war in 21st-century Europe, Ukrainian culture is thriving. It serves as a vital source of support for society and, significantly, for the military. By bringing together Ukrainian people domestically and effectively advocating for Ukraine globally, culture has regained substantial value during the ongoing full-scale Russo-Ukrainian War. For many across Europe, the impact of Ukrainian culture during this conflict has been uplifting, emphasising that in today's world, culture is not merely about entertainment or funded initiatives; it is a fundamental necessity for millions and a crucial part of the security system.

Nonetheless, the war is not yet over, and its outcome is still unclear. Ukrainian author Victoria Amelina, who unearthed the occupation diary of the

murdered poet Volodymyr Vakulenko, once wrote that she felt as if she were living amidst a new Executed Renaissance – a generation of Ukrainian intellectuals suppressed during Stalin's Great Terror of the 1920s and 1930s. Six months later, a Russian missile took Victoria Amelina's life.

When it comes to the unprecedented flourishing of Ukrainian culture during the war – a real-life phoenix rising – we must not forget that without the Ukrainian army and the support of the entire civilised world, this revival runs the risk of emerging from literal ashes.

War Diaries, since 2022 [fragment]

Alevtina Kakhidze

Alevtina Kakhidze – artist of Ukrainian-Georgian descent. Born in 1973 in Zhdanivka, Donetsk region. Today, she lives in Muzychi near Kyiv, where she has established a residency programme for international artists. She works with drawing, performance, installation, and video art.

She studied at the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture in Kyiv and the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. In her work, she has long taken a critical look at the reality of her country, often addressing issues that have been difficult or overlooked, such as the role of women in society or the rise of consumerism. Her 2006 performance *Only For Men Or Beloved, Appear Yourself In The Mirror* is considered the first consciously feminist action in Ukrainian art.

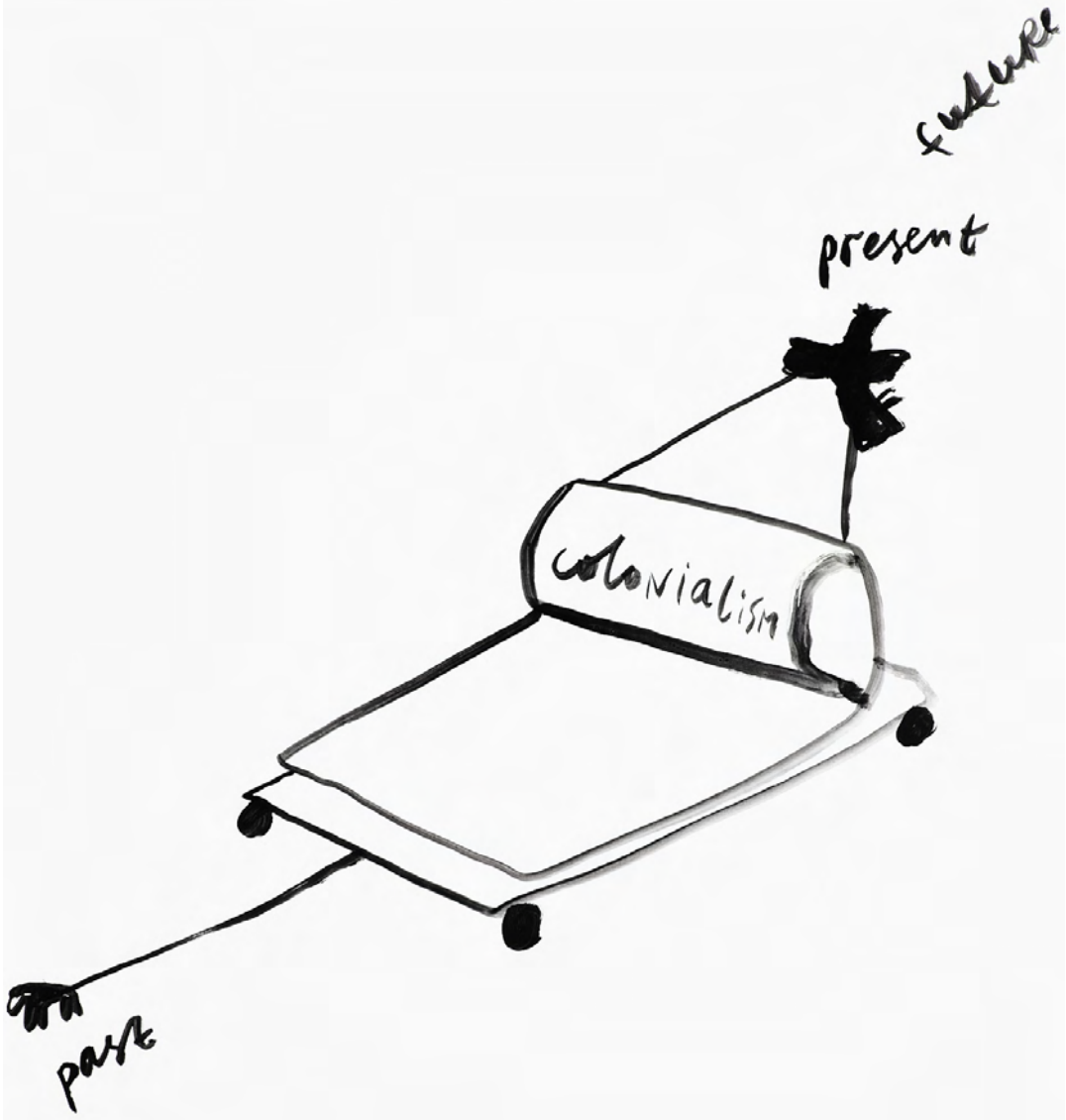
In her work, she created drawings during the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, depicted life in occupied Donbas, and has been commenting on the situation in Ukraine since Russia launched its full-scale war on 24 February 2022.

In 2008, she received the Kazimir Malevich Art Award. She participated in the 7th Berlin Biennale in 2012 and Manifesta 10 in Saint Petersburg

in 2014. Her solo exhibitions have been organised by institutions such as Arsenal Gallery in Białystok (2024), Bozar in Brussels (2017), as well as Ya Gallery (2008, 2011) and PinchukArtCentre (2014) in Kyiv.


I am
still alive
in UKRAINE
BUT IT IS by
ACCIDENT
Mevtina
KAKHIDZE
18.01.2023


all EMPIRES have fallen
Why are you so sad
Not, Really


future
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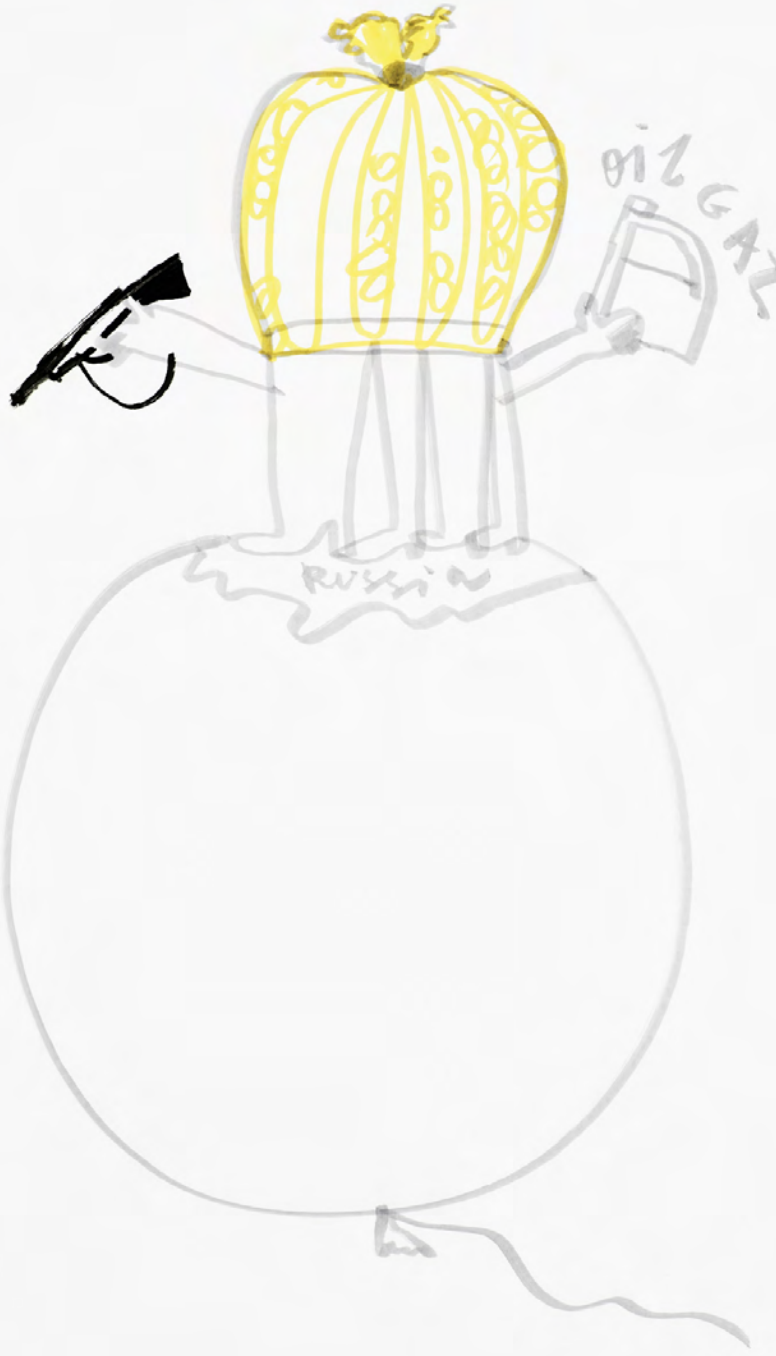
OIL GAS
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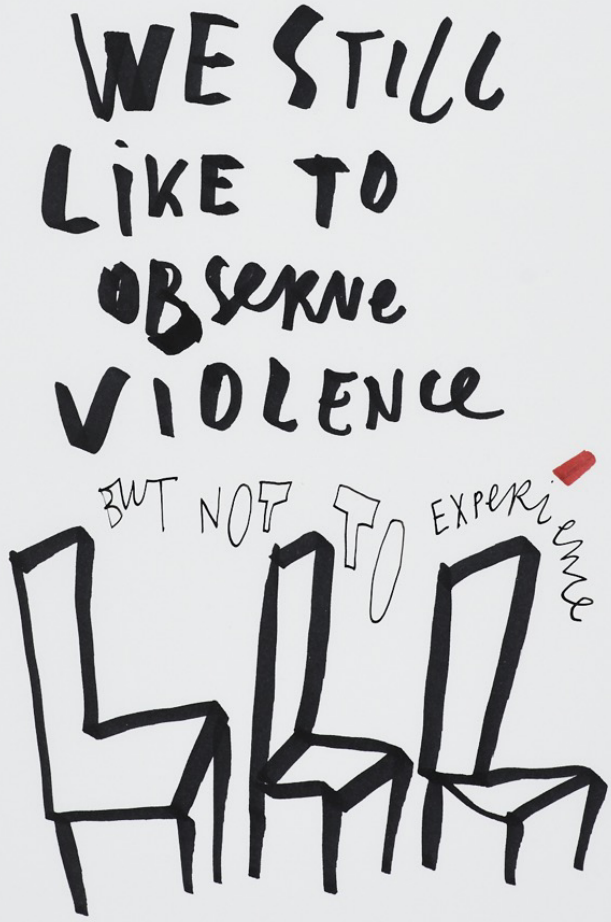

WE STILL
LIKE TO
OBSERVE
VIOLENCE
BUT NOT TO EXPERIENCE

Russia now

A Chronicle of the Recent History of Ukraine by Alevtina Kakhidze

Piotr Kosiewski

In April 2014, a pro-Russian rebellion broke out, leading to the establishment of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics. The town of Zhdanivka, Alevtina Kakhidze's hometown, was among the areas seized by the separatists. Her mother, despite repeated pleas, refused to leave her home. 'I am not a wardrobe that can be taken away', she succinctly remarked.

Later, for years, she told her daughter about life in a state of deep social division. In a situation where – as the artist recalled in an interview for the magazine Ukrainky, quoting her mother's words – 'for years, you sell parsley at the market next to someone, and then that person starts supporting the "republic", and your life is in ruins, it hurts!'[1] For years, the artist's mother also had to cross the demarcation line, often standing for hours at a checkpoint, in order to reach the areas still under Ukraine's control. Only there could she collect her pension. That was also when she would call her daughter. On 16 January 2019, she set out once again. She died at the crossing after waiting for many hours.

For years, the artist documented each of their conversations by creating drawings accompanied by text. This resulted in *Klubnika Andriyivna* (2014–2021) – or: *Ms. Strawberry Andriyivna* – a story about her mother, who was a kindergarten teacher in Zhdanivka and was called 'Strawberry' by the children. The work is both an account of life in the occupied territories – difficult, complex, and far from unambiguous. To this day, it remains one of the key works dedicated to the war waged against Ukraine in 2014.

1 Алевтина Кахідзе – про фемінізм, свободу творчості та інше, Українки. Розмовляла Вікторія Шапаренко, https://ukrainky.com.ua/alevtyna-kahidze-koly-vidbuvayutsya-taki-perturbaczi-yi-yak-zaraz-zalyshayetsya-tilky-spravzhnye-mystecztvo-a-nespravzhnye-perestaye-isnuvaty/ (accessed here and in further footnotes 10 February 2025).

On 22 February 2022, Alevtina Kakhidze did not leave the village of Muzychi near Kyiv, where she had lived for many years. She stayed even as Russian troops advanced towards the Ukrainian capital. On the door of her studio, she simply posted an appeal to the occupiers: 'Follow the example of plants – they are the pacifists of this planet. Strive to be like them!'

She took care of animals – her own and those of neighbours who had fled from the Russian troops: dogs, cats, chickens, and even aquarium fish. She went into hiding while at the same time drawing, posting her works on her Facebook profile, and giving interviews. In the end, the Russians did not capture Kyiv, but in Bucha, located in the same region, they massacred around 400 civilians.

'I am staying in Ukraine to understand what is happening,' she said in an interview with Philipp Hindahl, published in the German magazine Monopol a few days after the start of the Russian aggression. However, she immediately added: 'I cannot say that every Ukrainian artist should do the same.'[2]

In 2014, during the Maidan protests, Alevtina Kakhidze was among the artists who visited the wounded in hospitals. She listened to their stories and then created illustrated narratives. Already back then, she noticed how important it was to counter Russian propaganda, which claimed that the protesters were merely a marginal part of society from western Ukraine. In her works, she demonstrated that reality was far more complex. In *Klubnika Andriyivna*, she gave a voice to those who remained on the other side of the demarcation line.

In the previously mentioned interview with Philipp Hindahl, she also said that drawing is her key to accepting reality. She has been doing it since the age of four and has remained faithful to the style of her childhood. Of course, at university, she had to learn academic principles, but she quickly returned to her original way of drawing – with simplified forms of figures and objects, accompanied by sharp commentary. A black line, only occasionally enriched with colour. In her works – deliberately sparse, formally close to the style of British artist David Shrigley or Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi, yet distinct – she retains the lightness of children's drawings while also incorporating the sharpness and irony of editorial cartoons at their finest.

2 'Ich bleibe in der Ukraine, um zu verstehen, was passiert,' *Monopol – Magazin für Kunst und Leben*, 28 February 2022, https://www.monopol-magazin.de/kuenstlerin-alevtina-kakhidze-interview-ukraine-krieg/.

Alevtina Kakhidze also works with performance and video installations, but it was drawing that turned out to be her foremost artistic medium after Russia launched its full-scale war. It allowed for a quick response, as works created in this format are easy to disseminate on social media. She began documenting her daily life during the war – hiding in a basement without electricity, lacking even the bare essentials, living in constant fear because the possibility of Russian troops entering her village remained real. Living in a country under relentless attack, with air raid sirens sounding every day, yet still trying to function as normally as possible. Over time, these drawings started to form what has since become *War Diaries*, which she continues to this day.

Her works created in February and March 2022 were messages from a country that had fallen victim to imperial aggression. Drawing became a tool for the artist to explain to others what was happening in her country. As she herself said in an interview on 5 April 2022, published on the website of the Parisian Palais de Tokyo: 'Can I blame people for not knowing what is happening in Ukraine if I myself didn't know that the same had happened in the past in Georgia or Moldova?'[3]

She spoke about Ukrainian reality from her own perspective. Through her drawings, she could – to use Anna Łazar's phrase[4] – cross borders with ease and 'aim her message at any point in the world.'

One of her most recent works is *Data* (2024), a series of drawings on foil summarising the Russian aggression since 24 February 2022. In these works, she presents facts and events, moving away from conventional perspectives on the war. She titled the individual panels *Corruption and Mobilisation (Men and Women)*, *Missile Attacks and Art*, *Museums and the Wounded*, *Demining and the Land*, highlighting data that is not always widely known outside Ukraine. 'The missile attack on Kyiv on the night of 21 March 2024 cost Russia USD 390 million', the artist notes. 'The Ukrainian PEN monitors losses among cultural figures as reports emerge in the media. By August 2024, 122 people had already died', she adds.

On another panel, she states: 'In two years of full-scale war, Russian forces have destroyed 1,946 cultural infrastructure sites, including 113 museums

3 Alevtina Kakhidze. Témoignage d'une artiste ukrainienne, Palais de Tokyo, 5 April 2022, https://palaisdetokyo.com/ressource/alevtina-kakhidze-temoignage-dune-artiste-ukrainienne/.

4 A. Łazar, How Can We Measure the Value of Works Created During Bombardment? in: *Alevtina Kakhidze. Plants and People*, Arsenal Gallery, Białystok 2024 (exhibition booklet), https://galeria-arsenal.pl/images/upload/wystawy/2024/alevtina-kakhidze_rosliny-i-ludzie/ulotka/Alevtina_tekst_EN.pdf/.

and galleries', followed by another piece of data: 'During the Russian invasion, nearly 50,000 people have lost limbs, a number comparable to the scale of World War I.'[5]

The information presented by Alevtina Kakhidze highlights the complexity of Ukrainian reality and the challenge of describing it while accounting for so many different aspects – especially in an era dominated by social media and an overwhelming flood of visual images that we encounter almost non-stop.

However, *War Diaries* are not only about the situation in Ukraine. She continuously comments on global events, particularly in the cultural sphere after 24 February 2022. Her works have become a significant voice in key discussions on the role of art and the boycott of Russian culture. She has responded to statements made by others, engaging in debates with well-known figures of the Western world – from Immanuel Kant and his treatise *Perpetual Peace*, through Hannah Arendt and Theodor W. Adorno, to Bruno Latour and Boris Groys. She poses difficult questions, the most pressing being: how could war break out in Europe today, and why did the international community ignore Russian aggression for so many years?

Finally, a key theme for her is Russia's imperial policy. Through her drawings and other works, she sharply analyses Russian narratives, propaganda clichés, and more. She brings up statements that were previously ignored. In her film *Dialogue #7, or a Brief Attempt at Testimony* (2024), she references the infamous interview with Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the Hermitage Museum and one of the leading supporters of Russia's current aggression, who openly declared in an interview for Rossiyskaya Gazeta in 2022:[6] 'We are all militarists and imperialists.' The artist also reminds us that all the works presented at Manifesta 10 in Saint Petersburg were censored before their exhibition – a fact that did not elicit any reaction from European and American art circles, galleries, or museums. Collaboration with the Hermitage and other Russian institutions was only severed after Moscow launched its full-scale war.

Alevtina Kakhidze's works are now an important voice in discussions on the decolonisation of Ukraine, its historical memory, and the construction of

5 Quotes from: *Alevtina Kakhidze. Plants and People…*

6 Почему необходимо быть со своей страной, когда она совершает исторический поворот и выбор. Отвечает Михаил Пиотровский, Российская газета, 22.06.2022, https://rg.ru/2022/06/22/kartina-mira.html/.

Alevtina Kakhidze, *All good?*, 2024, Arsenal Gallery, Białystok, photo Jan Szewczyk.

contemporary identity. One of the key questions concerns attitudes towards the Soviet legacy – a challenge she herself grapples with. 'I was a complete product of Russian culture, not even learning my own language. Only recently have I turned to Ukrainian literature to understand my own culture. I still cannot write in Ukrainian without making mistakes', she said in the previously mentioned interview on the Palais de Tokyo website.

In one of her latest works, *All good?* (2024), she used family documents, various archival materials, clippings, drawings, and even plants taken from herbariums. She arranged them into a narrative about the lives of her family members – her Ukrainian and Georgian grandparents, her parents, and herself. It is a story of complex, difficult, and sometimes tragic individual fates intertwined with key events shaping this part of Europe in the 20th century: the First and Second World Wars, the formation of the Soviet Union, collectivisation and industrialisation during the Soviet era, the collapse of the empire and Ukraine's declaration of independence, the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict, Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008, and against Ukraine in 2014. All these stories form a highly nuanced, deeply layered history – one that differs both from the official Russian narrative and from attempts to erase this past as mere post-communist heritage. It is a perspective that integrates the memory of life in the Soviet Union into contemporary Ukrainian identity while also making it accessible to younger generations.

Similarly, *War Diaries* represents an attempt to answer the question of how to speak about this war to all potential audiences without resorting to old, worn-out artistic tropes. The entries seek a way of expression that is acceptable to those experiencing violence – one that captures the individuality of these events without losing their universal dimension, while also making the story comprehensible to an external audience.

Alevtina Kakhidze is not alone. The war is also being documented by Lesia Khomenko, Nikita Kadan, Zhanna Kadyrova, and many other Ukrainian artists. They share a common experience – born in the final decades of the Soviet Union, they came of age in independent Ukraine. All of them graduated from art schools and confronted a conservative institutional system, largely shaped by the previous era. In response, they began creating alternatives through grassroots initiatives. It turned out that the model they adopted not only secured them a strong foothold in Ukraine's artistic landscape but also established them within the international art scene. It is this approach that has ensured the voices of Ukrainian artists have continued to be heard beyond Ukraine's borders since 24 February 2022.

Ukrainian Resilience: Or What Culture and Cultural Institutions Are Trying to Do to Win. Practical Experience and Some Theory

Olesia Ostrovska-Liuta

In April 2022, as soon as Russian troops retreated from Kyiv, my colleagues and I gathered at Mystetskyi Arsenal to figure out what to do next.[1] Lots of people in Ukraine were thinking about how they could contribute to the resistance against Russian aggression, and we were no exception. We were talking about the work of one of the most important Ukrainian cultural institutions located in the heart of Kyiv, not far from the government quarter, in a giant architectural monument of the late 18th and early 19th centuries – the Old Arsenal. This national institution has a multidisciplinary character and combines the preservation and research of its own museum collection with work on contemporary art, literature and book publishing, as well as educational programmes. The Mystetskyi Arsenal's collection has several components: artistic works of the Ukrainian avant-garde of the early 20th century, contemporary art and archaeological finds from the Arsenal's territory, which record the history of Kyiv in the

Olesia Ostrovska-Liuta, born in 1978 in Lviv, is the manager and curator of contemporary art, and general director of Kyiv's Mystetskyi Arsenal. In 2000, she earned a master's degree in cultural studies from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Towards the end of her studies, she worked as the head of the office at the International Renaissance Foundation.
In 2003, she became an assistant director at the Foundation for the Centre for Contemporary Art at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. From 2008 to 2014, she managed projects and programmes at the Rinat Akhmetov Foundation for the Development of Ukraine, where she established a grant programme for Ukrainian artists and launched the museum modernisation project Dynamic Museum.
After the Revolution of Dignity, from late February to December 2014, she served as the first deputy minister of culture under Yevhen Nyshchuk.

1 For more information: https://www.ukrainer.net/pl/mysteckyj-arsenal (accessed 10 February 2025).

She later headed the analytics department at the expert firm pro.mova. In 2016, she won the competition for the position of director of the Mystetskyi Arsenal museum and art complex in Kyiv. She was one of the first leaders of a state cultural institution in Ukraine to be selected through a competitive process, coming from outside of State structures.
She introduced significant changes to the operation of Mystetskyi Arsenal, transforming it into a modern cultural institution that hosts many major events. In 2019, the Book Arsenal festival held there was recognised as the world's best literary festival, receiving the British International Excellence Award.
In 2021, Olesia Ostrovska-Liuta was reappointed as the director of Mystetskyi Arsenal.

vicinity of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, one of the oldest centres of Christianity and book culture in Ukraine. The collection itself is part of national heritage and legally owned by the people of Ukraine.

So, what should we do? What is our role in the Ukrainian fight against the aggressor? Should we continue our work? If so, what is primary and what is secondary? What expectations does Ukrainian society have for us? What about the Arsenal's museum collection, which was evacuated from Kyiv in the first days of the full-scale invasion? What about our largest annual project, the Book Arsenal Festival, which in 2021 was attended by more than 36,000 visitors and brought the entire Ukrainian publishing community of authors, artists and illustrators together virtually, and was rightfully considered the most popular Ukrainian book event of the year? Under normal conditions, the Book Arsenal would have taken place at the end of May, and in April the last stages of preparatory work would have been underway.

Therefore, at that moment we were not talking about theory, but about very practical questions. However, the answers to these questions were not only based on specific actions and programmatic decisions, but also on a bit of theory.

We discussed the role of cultural institutions and creators in times of war. And we were considering whether we should continue our work, and whether Ukrainian society should accept and support it. And our very first answer identified three tasks for cultural institutions during wartime. But given the scale of these tasks in a time that can be considered not just a crisis but a catastrophe, we consider them to be not just tasks but three missions of our time. So, what are these missions?

Firstly, in the face of the Russian war, which is genocidal in nature and aimed at erasing all forms of Ukrainian identity, every cultural institution must perform the function of preservation. In the case of the Arsenal, it is primarily about preserving the museum collection and, to the greatest

extent possible, the building, which is an architectural monument of national significance. But for other organisations, this may extend beyond museum collections to include the artists themselves and all the people involved in the creation of culture, as well as the creative practices they are involved in. It is important that poets stay alive and continue writing poetry, musicians continue playing music, stage directors continue staging performances, and so on, depending on the profile of each individual institution. The preservation of the entire body of culture is a guarantee of the preservation of the community that shares this culture, i.e. Ukrainian society. The history of Ukraine in the 19th and 20th centuries shows that, based on culture, such a community can survive and endure for a long time even without a national state, although not in the best condition. It also teaches us what a devastating blow for society the destruction of the creative community can be: when there are literally no people of culture, as was the case after the mass murders of Ukrainian culture figures in the 1920s and 1930s, society remains weakened and disoriented. That is why, at the very beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion, the task of preserving culture seemed so important: cultural artefacts, creators, practices, and institutions. To a large extent, this was a grassroots act of resistance to genocide.

Secondly, literally from the first minutes of the war, the Ukrainian cultural community became the self-appointed voice of Ukraine in the world, and this largely illustrated the role of culture during this period of time. Ukrainian artists, cultural professionals, organisations – all of them began to testify, to talk about what they saw happening in Ukraine. And also to explain to millions of bewildered foreigners how to understand the fierce Ukrainian resistance to Russian aggression. Why do Ukrainians consider the occupation more deadly than the war itself? Why are they willing to risk staying in threatened cities? Why isn't Ukrainian identity a new phenomenon that came into being with the collapse of the USSR, and why didn't the war strengthen it, but simply revealed it to the many people around the world who knew nothing about it? Culture in general, and cultural institutions in particular, are a natural carrier, platform, and amplifier for the voice of the witness. So, our task as the Mystetskyi Arsenal team was to speak up as well. That is why, on the morning of 24 February 2022, we wrote an appeal to our international colleagues, describing the war as seen by Ukrainians, and distributed it in all the ways we could. In response, for example, our colleagues from Lithuania, the Vilnius Book Fair, which had just started its work on 24 February, read our appeal during the official opening ceremony. This underlined the task of a cultural institution: to speak, even when the shock takes your voice

away. To talk about real experience, even though it can be a frightening and emotionally exhausting task for people working in such an institution.

My colleague, Yulia Kozlovets, who is the director of the Book Arsenal, a popular Ukrainian celebration of books and literature, was working on one of the texts when a Russian cruise missile hit one of the buildings in Kyiv for the first time, right in front of her window. So the answer to the question what makes both a person and an institution continue working under such conditions was of both practical and existential importance to us. And it was our duty to speak on our own behalf during this very difficult time.

Thirdly, and this task became apparent a little bit later, with the retreat of Russian troops from Kyiv, every cultural institution became a place of reflection on common experience. In April 2022, the Mystetskyi Arsenal team could not organise a book festival, but we felt the need to meet with our regular visitors and talk about what we were going through. Every year a special theme is chosen for the Book Arsenal programme; we call it a focus theme, which is the main metaphor around which all discussions, exhibitions, concerts, lectures, etc. revolve. The focus theme chosen for the festival in 2021 was 'Our Great Migration.'

In the spring of 2022, when millions of Ukrainian refugees were scattered across Europe and North America, it seemed prophetic. We were struck by the tragic relevance of the topic to what we were all experiencing in Kyiv and other cities. Each of us needed someone to discuss and reflect with on what we had experienced, or even just to listen to someone's story, which resonated deeply with similar experiences. And so, having barely survived the siege of Kyiv and continuing to work on tasks one and two described above, we decided to organise perhaps the first public cultural event in Kyiv, a discussion called 'The Great Migration.' It was supposed to be a conversation about the Book Arsenal, which was impossible at the time, and we talked a lot about this impossibility, but even more about everything that had happened to Ukrainians from 24 February 2022 until the event itself.

Our team was preparing 'The Great Migration' panel, not knowing whether there would be any audience in the city for such an extravagance as a conference meeting threatened by air strikes. But suddenly, people began to gather in the courtyard of the Mystetskyi Arsenal, covered with a thick white carpet of chestnut blooms (it was May!). We didn't expect hundreds of people, and we also didn't know how long the conversation might last, or that no one would leave the cold gallery, but that all those present would crave the words being spoken with the intensity of people dying of thirst. This incident

highlighted for us the needs of people who were staying in Kyiv despite the circumstances and the role of any cultural institution: to be a place where people think, share, imagine and remember something that is common for them, rather than live it.

All this is part of the institutional dimension of culture in wartime. It is only partial, but it describes well what people need in a war-torn country and how culture can and, ultimately, does try to respond to them at the institutional level, as well as how culture can strengthen the resilience of its people. At the same time, none of these tasks was an instruction from authorities above, or even a pre-prepared plan, because even the evacuation of museum exhibits turned out to be a process with a million modifications, depending on the specific location and circumstances of each collection. And this is a very important point to mention.

The tasks or missions performed by Ukrainian cultural institutions, communities, and even individual artists had one thing in common. Almost all the time this action was of a self-appointed nature. Above I described how this worked in the case of promoting Ukrainian voice abroad. However, self-authorisation was a necessary condition for any action, including cultural or advocacy. This was the mode of operation for everyone who asked themselves what they could do for common defence. One had to find a role for oneself and take it on. Certainly, this led to a whole cascade of bad art exhibitions, failed movie screenings, and superficial texts. However, it seems like war may not be the time for nuanced gatekeeping, and rough strokes are a necessary price to pay for the rapid spread of voices.

The question of how to not only speak with our own voice, but also speak deeply, intelligently, and create an interesting cultural phenomenon, was posed later, at the end of the summer of 2022. And although now, in the autumn of 2024, it seems that the autumn of 2022 was a very early period, at that time the density of events and experiences was such that six months felt like years.

So, in the second half of 2022, it became quite clear that the first three tasks/missions were not enough. They needed to be continued and were all equally important, but it was not enough to preserve, give voice to, and create a space for shared experience. It is very important not to let the aggressor deafen you, take away your ability to think in a complex, nuanced way, to reflect. There is an apt word in English: debilitate, to weaken to the point where a person becomes incapable. As a team, we began to feel to what extent war is just such a debilitating experience, and how this should not be allowed.

Even before the war, an important method of the Arsenal's work was to search for what we call the 'essence of the times', an attempt to understand what is important for the human situation in the world and in Ukraine today – and then create a programme of exhibitions, festivals, discussions, literary and educational events that would answer this question. This was the path we took in the autumn of 2022 in an attempt to understand what Mystetskyi Arsenal could offer to its audience: people living in the reality of war. We spent hours discussing what we, those who live here and now, feel, what we think about, and where we see particularly burning issues. What we could discuss with many other people in other countries, where we have common experiences and points of reflection, including artistic reflection. What is still not obvious to our viewers, but no less important, and how we can present it. All of this led us to the idea behind our biggest project of that year, the contemporary art exhibition *The Heart of the Earth*.

The curators of the project – Olga Zhuk, Anna Pohribna, Natasha Chychasova, and I – asked ourselves: what was the global impact of the Russian war against Ukraine? What does war do to people on the most intimate, physical, even bodily level? How, even far from the epicentre of the fighting, knowing nothing about the scorched fields of the Ukrainian south, unaware of the consequences of missile launches at Ukraine, artillery shelling of Ukrainian lands and widespread mining, does a person feel this war within his or her body? How is this Russian war poisoning the lives of people far away on other continents, in places we can hardly imagine?

These considerations made us think about Ukraine's role in the global food supply. And then about the state of Ukrainian soil and water, the importance of land for different generations of Ukrainians, and the consequences of mass farming on the world's most fertile black soil in the Ukrainian east. Certainly, there was the question of the barbaric contamination of these lands by the chemicals contained in modern weapons, as well as the destruction and theft of millions of tonnes of grain and weaponisation of food – the use of food as a means of controlling the disobedient. It was, therefore, about the far-reaching consequences of the war for the survival of people not only in Ukraine but also far beyond its borders.

All these questions were raised in *The Heart of the Earth* exhibition, and this was another contribution from a cultural institution to the continuity of thinking, a deep study of real experience turned into knowledge, to the degree it seemed possible at that particular moment.

The Mystetskyi Arsenal was and remains an institution that expends a great deal of effort to avoid debilitation even during the war, and is actually one of many such initiatives.

One of the most important Ukrainian examples of resilience and much-needed work on unity and community support is the Kharkiv Literary Museum. In fact, this is a small institution focused on collecting, preserving, understanding, and communicating the heritage of Ukrainian literature, and it has become a point of support for residents of the city. And we are talking about a metropolis on the Russian border, which Russia is methodically destroying through various forms of bombing, from artillery to ballistic missiles and guided aerial bombs. And it is in this city that the Literary Museum is a place for the city's residents and the Ukrainian literary community to come together, reflect on and discuss their experiences, and be with like-minded people. One of the museum's projects is a residence for writers in the famous Slovo House in Kharkiv, built in the early Soviet era for Ukrainian writers, almost all of whom were later repressed or killed. This residence was founded by a group of like-minded people, including publisher Oleksandr Savchuk, the Nabok family of Kharkiv, writer Serhiy Zhadan,[2] and PEN Ukraine, a few years before the full-scale Russian war. However, it became a real point of resilience during the war. It still functions today in Kharkiv, which is subjected to daily bombardments, and thus for many remains a symbol and a pledge of Ukrainian resilience. Seeing this example, many people in other cities think: 'If they can do it, so can we.' This is precisely when an example matters.

Even smaller in terms of numbers, but very significant in terms of quality, is the Kherson-based *Book in the Shelter* project, which plays a similar role in this city. Kherson is a city that is within the reach of Russian artillery and drones, and therefore is particularly affected by constant terror from the Russians and even drone-hunting for civilians. And in these circumstances, a group of young people, including Marina Chizhova, Aelita Gorbunova, and Anton Novikov, is carrying out an activity that seems to be more of a small grassroots movement than a project, which despite its seemingly small scope, requires great personal courage and is of extraordinary importance. This is an initiative to equip and replenish libraries in Kherson shelters, where people are often forced to stay for long periods of time. Books here play a consoling role, representing a distraction from a difficult reality, and at the same time a kind of connection with our people – authors and readers

2 Serhiy Zhadan – a Ukrainian prose writer, poet, essayist and playwright (editor's note).

all over Ukraine, not to mention with the Kherson residents who bring their books here to share.

I want to emphasise once again the grassroots nature of all these initiatives and even institutional activities. This is not a top-down policy, although public institutions such as the Mystetskyi Arsenal and the Literary Museum are owned by Ukrainian citizens and receive partial public funding. However, the activities themselves are the result of deep involvement in the life of society and programmatic decisions by the teams of these institutions.

Self-empowerment and maximum involvement in the context of human life here and now, and thus not avoidance, but rather learning from the experience of human life in war, are important features of the phenomenon that can be generally called 'Ukrainian resilience.' It can be seen in the cultural sphere precisely because it is a sphere of expressive gesture, a stage that exists to express the spirit of its time and situation.

The trajectory of events at Mystetskyi Arsenal and other initiatives described here perfectly highlight both the state of reflection on the role of culture in national resilience and the actions that were intended to strengthen this resilience. However, already now, in the autumn of 2024, it is clear that new challenges and, consequently, new tasks for the cultural sector are emerging. Interestingly, they are new only in terms of the degree of awareness, not in terms of their very existence.

For example, the huge migration of Ukrainians abroad, especially children, raises the question of whether they remain a cultural and political community, even if they stay in other countries. If not, what are the implications for Ukraine as a state and nation within its internationally recognised borders? If yes, what can the cultural stage do to preserve and strengthen this connection? Do we see not only negative but also positive consequences of this 'great migration'? The lack of work to maintain this connection on the cultural stage can significantly weaken all other achievements and developments within the framework of tasks one, two and three described above. Preserving a community that is shrinking dramatically and, more importantly, whose future prospects are shrinking, becomes not only more difficult but sometimes meaningless, as in the case of many physically destroyed small communities in eastern and southern Ukraine. However, such pessimism may be premature and excessive. I mention these new challenges to point out that not only are the conditions and situation in Ukraine constantly changing, but that the analysis and conclusions drawn about 'Ukrainian resilience' and the role of culture are dynamic. Moreover, previous conclusions,

and thus tasks/missions, do not necessarily lose their relevance. It is often more about expanding the number of tasks that require the same amount of parallel attention.

Another important question arises: we have seen how cultural actors in Ukraine think about themselves and their role, but to what extent is this perception justified and consistent with the state of affairs? This question can be partially answered by quantitative indicators that may be unexpected for these actors themselves. For example, despite major logistical difficulties, the loss of staff and some printing capacity due to the Russian bombing and a significant rise in the price of books, there is a significant revival of interest in Ukrainian books and literature in Ukraine. This is manifested in a surge in the number of new bookstores in large cities far from the front line, a whole wave of new book fairs and festivals, and not only in Kyiv and Lviv where they were traditional, as well as steady sales of book editions. The Book Arsenal, the main annual project of the Mystetskyi Arsenal and one of the most important book and literary forums in Ukraine, this year again attracted over 35,000 visitors, despite all the wartime restrictions. Performances by Ukrainian writers, especially of poet Serhiy Zhadan, who is emblematic of Ukrainian culture, attract thousands of people and fill stadium capacity. Similarly, very interesting processes are taking place in Ukrainian pop music, where new names and a new audience are rapidly emerging. Theatrical life in big cities has also significantly revived.

Such processes may indicate the need for people in Ukraine to unite on the basis of culture, to create and support communities of like-minded people. This clearly resonates with the tasks that the cultural stage, i.e. both creators and professional institutions set for themselves. However, this is currently a working hypothesis that needs only to be proven. At the same time, in the changing and uncertain context of war, it is impossible to allocate time and resources for pure research that would precede action. It is necessary to act, research, analyse, and interpret simultaneously. This is a characteristic condition of Ukraine, aptly described by the cultural critic Kateryna Botanova as 'a state of radical simultaneity.' Here, everything happens simultaneously with great intensity. Therefore, imagining the future often coincides with reflection on the present and even post-reflection. And there is hardly any human activity better adapted to such conditions than the creation of culture itself.

Cultural Wars

Mykola Riabchuk

Ukrainian Civil Society in the Fight Against Russian Cultural Expansion

At the beginning of 2014, the Ukrainian state found itself on the brink of collapse. Four years of Viktor Yanukovych's rule and the so-called 'Donetsk oligarchic clan' had completely devastated fragile institutions, which had never been strong enough to begin with. This applied primarily to the military and security services, where Moscow had managed to install its own citizens at the helm, as well as the police, judiciary, and practically all branches of government, especially in the south and east of the country, where the degree of Russian influence was the strongest and most enduring.

The Russian occupation of Crimea and hybrid aggression in Donbas, disguised as a 'popular uprising,' became a threat to the very existence of the country. It was civil society that stepped in to save the State – volunteers who took up arms, those who organised supplies of ammunition, medicine, and food for Ukrainian soldiers, medics who treated the wounded, as well as bloggers and citizen journalists who took on the task of debunking Russian fake news and conveying the truth about the undeclared war to both the Ukrainian and global public.

Mykola Riabchuk, journalist, publicist, poet, writer, and scholar, was born in 1953 in Lutsk. In 1977, he graduated from the Lviv Polytechnic Institute with a degree in electromechanical engineering, and in 1988, he completed his studies at the A.M. Gorky Institute of Literature in Moscow, earning a degree in philology. He worked as an editor, department head, and deputy editor-in-chief at Vsesvit, the oldest Ukrainian magazine dedicated to foreign literature. He contributed cultural columns to the newspaper Den and served as an editor for the magazine Krytyka. He was also a research fellow at the Institute of Cultural Policy and the Centre for European Humanities Studies at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy.
Since 2012, he has been working at the Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. He serves on the editorial boards of various journals in Ukraine and abroad and is a jury member for the Central European Literary Award Angelus. He also holds the position of honorary chairman of PEN Ukraine.
He has been a fellow of numerous academic programmes in Europe and the United States

as well as lectures as a visiting professor at the Ukrainian Catholic University and several international institutions. In 2022, he was awarded the Taras Shevchenko National Prize, Ukraine's highest cultural distinction.
He has authored several monographs, numerous academic articles, and popular science books, which have been translated into several languages, including Polish. His works include *From Malorossiya to Ukraine* (2002), *Two Ukraines* (2004), *Metternich's Garden* (2010), *Ukraine: The Postcolonial Syndrome* (2015), and *Fourteenth from the End: Stories of Contemporary Ukraine* (2022).
His research interests include post-communist transformations, postcolonialism, national identity, language and cultural policy, as well as Polish-Ukrainian and Ukrainian-Russian relations.

Civil society, naturally, cannot replace the State or remain in constant mobilisation mode. As state institutions were rebuilt and their operations resumed, civic activity declined somewhat, but did not disappear entirely, as there was still a need to supply the military with vast amounts of essential goods, care for the wounded, and assist internally displaced persons, among other things.

The full-scale Russian invasion of 2022 once again forced civil society into decisive action, mobilisation, and redoubling its efforts – both in the realm of 'traditional' volunteer work, fundraising, and communication, as well as in areas indirectly related to the military and warfare, such as combating corruption, promoting reforms aimed at integration with the European Union, cultural diplomacy, heritage protection, and education. During wartime, the cultural and educational activities of non-governmental organisations may seem secondary, yet they play a systemic, broad, and multifaceted role.[1] In fact, even before the war, society had to take on many of the responsibilities of the dysfunctional state – let us only recall that the deputy prime minister for humanitarian affairs in Yanukovych's government was the staunch Ukrainophobe Dmytro Tabachnyk, who oversaw culture, education, and the media.

When it comes to culture, the efforts of non-governmental organisations and civil society as a whole focus on three general areas of activity. First – supporting promising cultural projects that the State is uninterested in for various reasons, most often due to a lack of funding but also, at times, because of the indifference or incompetence of certain officials. The best example of such an initiative is the Lviv Publishers' Forum, launched in 1994 by a group of enthusiasts and gradually developed into a major cultural event – the annual International Book Fair and Literary Festival, featuring dozens of

1 A. Kutsyk, V. Hodlevska, *Ukrainian Civil Society and Volodymyr Zalenskyy: In Terms of Cooperation, Contradictions and Challenges 2019–2023*, European Journal of Transformation Studies 2023, no. 11 (2), pp. 106–124, https://repozytorium.bg.ug.edu.pl/info/article/UOGbc26e60a11504640ab7d519f7fef7991 (accessed here and further 10 February 2025).

participants, thousands of visitors, and extensive media coverage.[2] Another example is the emergence and promotion of alternative literary and artistic awards, which serve as a counterbalance to discredited state honours.

Second – the cultural, educational, and promotional dimension. Its significance has become particularly evident during the full-scale invasion, as the occupiers have destroyed or looted dozens of libraries, museums have had to hide their most valuable exhibits in basement shelters[3] or transport them abroad to protect them from Russian missiles,[4] and theatres have been forced to drastically limit ticket sales, basing capacity not on the number of seats in their halls but on the availability of underground shelters in case of an air raid alarm. It was civil activists who, in the first days of the war, covered their most valuable monuments in the city with sandbags, and they have since become involved in a vast range of cultural initiatives – collecting books for bombed libraries (according to Ukrainian PEN, more than 40,000 books have already been gathered and delivered), creating anti-war graffiti, organising street photography exhibitions, and arranging volunteer-run concerts and literary events in front-line towns and cities.[5] Alongside Ukrainian PEN, which has extensive experience in a wide range of activities, cultural centres in other cities have also made a significant impact – among the most notable is the Yermilov Centre in Kharkiv, known for its interactive artistic programmes,[6] and the Donetsk-based art foundation Izolyatsia, which was forced to relocate to Kyiv in 2014 but continues to focus on the southeastern region and its challenges.[7]

The third, generally understood, area of activity for cultural civic organisations is communication, particularly on the international level, as Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine and Europe includes a significant informational – or rather, disinformational – component, in which culture plays a crucial role. After all, the Russian Empire has traditionally used culture not only to elevate and refine its otherwise barbaric image but also to degrade,

2 Lviv Book Forum, *How the Publishers' Forum created an International Literary Festival and a National Book Fair in Ukraine*, https://bookforum.ua/en/p/about/.

3 J. Farago, *The Role of Art in a Time of War*, The New York Times, 28 July 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/28/arts/design/ukraine-war-art-culture.html/.

4 D. Sanderson, *Treasures of Ukrainian modern art smuggled to safety. Under Russian bombardment, paintings by Sonia Delaunay and Kazymyr Malevych were driven across European borders for an exhibition*, The Times, 24 June 2024, https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/treasures-of-ukrainian-modern-art-smuggled-to-safety-hjvct8m8z/.

5 PEN Ukraine, *Projects*, 2024, https://pen.org.ua/projects/.

6 Yermilov Centre, *Sense of Safety*, 2024, https://yermilovcentre.org/announcements/274/.

7 Izolyatsia. Platform for Cultural Initiatives. Foundation, https://izolyatsia.org/en/foundation/.

objectify, and deny the existence of the nations it has subjugated.[8] Any attempt to diminish the achievements of Ukrainian culture – or to appropriate them – is part of the war Russia has been waging against Ukraine for many years (or rather, several centuries), aligning perfectly with its broader strategy of denying and destroying Ukraine. This strategy was explicitly articulated by Putin in 2007 during a conversation with President George W. Bush, when he stated that Ukraine 'is not even a country.'

The promotion of Ukrainian culture as a distinct and compelling phenomenon has gained particular importance under these circumstances. It involves active participation in international exhibitions, festivals, and book fairs, the intensive translation of artistic works – especially contemporary ones – into various languages, reviewing and commenting on Ukrainian cultural events in leading media outlets, systematically inviting foreigners to cultural events in Ukraine, and fostering personal connections between Ukrainian and international artists. For years, the Ukrainian state has been ineffective in these matters, as limited funding for cultural programmes was typically accompanied by a lack of competence among those responsible and widespread nepotism within state institutions. Under pressure from civil society and with its involvement, the situation improved somewhat in 2017–2018 following the establishment of the Ukrainian Institute[9] and the Book Institute[10] – institutions focused on international outreach. However, the lack of funding significantly undermines the effectiveness of these otherwise valuable initiatives.

The war has opened yet another field of activity for Ukrainian cultural activists – one that has proven to be the most controversial, both domestically and, even more so, internationally. This concerns so-called decolonisation – resisting the excessive dominance of Russian culture in Ukraine and worldwide while exposing and uncovering its imperial and colonial nature. It is precisely this most contentious aspect of the activities of Ukrainian artists and organisations that I would like to focus on and examine in detail, given the numerous misunderstandings surrounding the notion of decolonisation.

8 E. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*. Westport, CT and London: Greenwood 2000.

9 Ukrainian Institute, *Programmes and projects*, https://ui.org.ua/en/projects/.

10 Ukrainian Book Institute, *About us*, https://www.ubi.org.ua/en/organization/.

Conflicting Views

The deep divide between Ukrainian and Western perspectives on Russian culture and its promotion – or, conversely, its rejection in the face of war – first became apparent in 2014–2015, when Ukrainians unsuccessfully lobbied for the exclusion of the pro-Putin Russian PEN from the International PEN Club due to its support for the occupation of Crimea and intervention in Donbas.[11] Similarly, they were unable to convince their foreign colleagues to refrain from inviting some of the most repugnant, fascist-leaning Putinists – such as Putin's ideologue Alexander Dugin,[12] conductor Valery Gergiev[13] as well as writer and journalist Zakhar Prilepin[14] – to festivals, concerts, theatre performances, or literary presentations.[15]

The situation changed somewhat after the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022, when Western governments finally dared to impose serious sanctions on Russian politicians and businessmen linked to the aggression, as well as propagandists who justified and praised it. However, these sanctions did not extend to figures in academia and culture, many of whom had publicly endorsed the invasion of Ukraine. As before, Ukrainians were left to demand the cancellation of specific Putinists – whether their performances, publications, or public appearances – on an individual basis, presenting compelling evidence in each case and mobilising Western audiences to exert civic pressure on cultural institutions and managers. At times, these efforts yield

11 PEN Ukraine, *Про кризу в російському ПЕН-центрі. Заява Українського центру Міжнародного ПЕН-клубу*, 14 January 2017, https://pen.org.ua/pro-kryzu-v-rosijskomu-pen-tsentri-zayava-ukrayinskogo-tsentru-mizhnarodnogo-pen-klubu/.

12 Alexander Dugin (b. 1962) – Russian strategist, ideologue of Russian imperialism and Eurasianism, and one of the leaders of the Russian fascist movement. For years, he has proclaimed, for example, that 'Russia must destroy the "sanitary cordon" created from small, angry, and historically irresponsible states, with maniacal claims and slavish dependence on the thalassocratic West.' Among these states, of course, is Poland (editor's note).

13 Valery Gergiev (b. 1953) – one of the most active and frequently invited Russian conductors abroad. In 2014, he was among the signatories of an 'open letter from artists' supporting Russia's annexation of Crimea. Protests against his performances had already occurred at that time, such as outside New York's Carnegie Hall. However, it was only after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine that a wave of concert cancellations followed, including at Milan's La Scala, along with the termination of collaborations, such as with the Munich Philharmonic (editor's note).

14 Zakhar Prilepin (b. 1975) – actively involved in the banned National Bolshevik Party. As an OMON captain, he participated in the wars in Chechnya and later fought in Donbas. After 2022, he was placed on the European Council's sanctions list. As a writer, he has been recognised with awards and translated into multiple languages, including Polish (editor's note).

15 PEN Ukraine, *No platform for a terrorist! Statement of PEN Ukraine on Zakhar Prilepin's participation in the 34th Slovene Book Fair*, 21 November 2018, https://pen.org.ua/en/ne-robit-promotsiyi-terorystam-zayava-ukrayinskogo-pen-iz-pryvodu-uchasti-zahara-prilyepina-u-34-mu-slovenskomu-knyzhkovomu-yarmarku.

results, as was the case in September 2024 when the screening of Anastasia Trofimova's propaganda film Russians at War was cancelled at the Zurich International Film Festival. More often, however, they do not, as seen in Venice, where the same film was screened despite protests, or in Toronto, where the screening was merely postponed until the protests subsided.[16]

Many Western cultural figures still prefer to pretend that culture – like sport – has nothing to do with politics, and that those who, for instance, attend a concert played by a staunch Putinist or buy books written by a fervent Ukrainophobe should not be concerned with other aspects of their activities. From the liberal Western perspective, support for war and a criminal regime by cultural figures is seen more as a moral issue rather than one of legal responsibility. Until recently, the naïve belief that words should be countered with words allowed Russian propagandists to undermine Western institutions and erode public trust in them without obstruction. Only in recent years have Western governments begun taking a more responsible approach to Russia's subversive activities, imposing restrictions or outright bans on its influence centres.[17] Yet, the cultural sphere is still widely regarded in the West as supposedly apolitical, detached from the genocidal rhetoric of Russian leaders – and even more so from the genocidal actions of the Russian military.

It is often pointed out that most of Russia's leading writers and intellectuals were generally critical of their government and social system, suffering censorship and other forms of repression, and therefore do not deserve any additional posthumous censorship today. Calling for the cancellation of certain figures, their works, or performances is thus seen as almost barbaric – a form of nationalist iconoclasm, an attack on Culture itself, written with a capital 'C.' Ukrainians, unsurprisingly, hold the opposite view, arguing that in times of war, everything is political, and any form of 'soft power' – whether in culture or sport – ultimately supports the 'hard power' of the aggressor state. Symbolically, it enhances its prestige, refines its criminal image, and injects ambiguity into the perception of a rogue state.

Unlike people in the West, Russian elites – whether tsarist, Bolshevik, or the current Putinist regime – have always understood that culture is not just

16 K. Tsurkan, Documentary 'humanising' Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine sparks outrage at Venice, Toronto film festivals, 'Kyiv Independent,' 7 September 2024, https://kyivindependent.com/documentary-humanizing-russian-soldiers-fighting-in-ukraine-sparks-outrage-at-venice-film-festival/.

17 K. Atwood, S. Lyngaas, M. Conte, *Biden administration unveils new evidence of RT's key role in Russian intelligence operations globally*, CNN.com, 13 September 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/13/politics/biden-administration-rt-russian-intelligence/index.html/.

'soft power' but also a weapon. For this reason, they have spared no resources in promoting and strategically manipulating it. At times, they even express this belief with startling frankness. 'Our recent exhibitions abroad,' boasted Mikhail Piotrovsky, the staunch Putinist and director of St Petersburg's Hermitage Museum, 'are pure cultural invasion… If you prefer, it is our own 'special operation', which many do not like. Nevertheless, we push forward. And we will not let anyone interfere with our offensive.'[18]

Unfortunately, far too many people around the world still mindlessly support this 'offensive,' this 'special operation', while Ukrainians strive at all costs to explain that no culture is innocent or disinterested – least of all Russian culture, which has almost always aligned itself with the empire, its expansion, and has practically never spoken out in defence of the nations subjugated by it. In this sense, the Ukrainian experience with Russian culture is fundamentally different from that of the West. In Ukraine, as in other colonies, Russian culture was meant to replace and marginalise the national culture, to degrade it and confine it to provincial insignificance. In the West, by contrast, it posed no threat but rather appeared as a curiosity – an exotic facet of a state hiding behind a quasi-European façade while, in reality, being anti-European and Asiatic-despotic. The primary role of this culture in the West, as the Ukrainian publicist Pavlo Kazarin writes, was to generate interest, emphasise civilisational commonalities, and create space for dialogue.

The European nature of Russian culture diverted attention from the anti-European character of the Russian state. Artists and cultural figures played the role of carnival-like sales representatives for the 'mysterious Russian soul', in which bear and Sputnik, balalaika and ballet, the peasant hut and constructivism were blended in precisely measured proportions. In this imperial narrative, genius and villainy appear strikingly coherent. The Great Purge of 1937 – but Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony. Tanks in Budapest and the crushing of the Prague Spring – but five world chess champions. The invasion of Afghanistan – but Brodsky and his Nobel lecture. The cultural context could always serve as a universal 'but.' Dictatorship – but with Nureyev and Plisetskaya. The Gulag – but with Chaliapin and Tarkovsky. Terror – but with Diaghilev's Russian ballet and the Russian avant-garde. The simultaneous

18 E. Yakovleva, *Почему необходимо быть со своей Астраной, когда она совершает исторический переворот и выбор. Отвечает Михаил Пиотровский*. Russkaya Gazeta, 22 June 2022, https://rg.ru/2022/06/22/kartina-mira.html/.

coexistence of political barbarism and official culture in Russia allows many in the West to ignore the former and focus on the latter.[19]

Different experiences in dealing with Russia as a whole, and Russian culture in particular, make communication between Ukrainians and people in the West rather difficult and often lead to painful misunderstandings. This is evident in the recurring scandals sparked by Ukrainians refusing to share the stage with Russians at international events – even when those Russians are ostensibly 'good' and anti-Putin. Various arguments are put forward against such proximity, ranging from the simplest – a fundamental distrust of all Russians as potentially infected with the virus of imperial power, making their 'exported opposition' less than fully sincere – to more serious concerns about the (potential and unwanted) symbolic connotations of such collaboration. These include the implicit suggestion of a possible Ukrainian-Russian 'dialogue' or the discursive equation of two fundamentally unequal positions: that of a nation suffering genocide and that of a nation committing and overwhelmingly supporting it.

The Illusion of Dialogue

For people in the West, 'dialogue' is the essence of political culture and a fundamental value of liberal democracy. Their mindset is rooted in the belief that all people are rational and therefore capable of reaching a compromise, agreeing on a mutually acceptable solution to any problem. After all, if the 'first-best' option appears differently to both sides, there is always a 'second-best' alternative that is at least somewhat acceptable to everyone. It seems self-evident that a bad peace is better than a good war, that a draw is not the best but certainly not the worst outcome, and that agreeing to disagree is a *sine qua non* of any civilised discussion. The first instinct of people in the West when faced with any war – especially one as terrifying as the current one – is to stop it at any cost. This is why their invitations for Ukrainians to 'dialogue' with Russians are often more naïve than ill-intentioned. In their view, Russians are just as rational as anyone else, making the exchange of ideas and consideration of their arguments seem like a perfectly logical step in a reasonable direction.

Meanwhile, Ukrainians, who want only one thing from Russia – to be left alone and forgotten forever – do not understand why they should seek compromises with a serial killer or what they are supposed to discuss with their

19 P. Kazarin, *Дымовая завеса. Что не так с русской культурой?*, Ukrayiska Pravda, 20 December 2023, https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2023/12/20/7433694/.

Russian counterparts if those individuals neither prevented nor seem particularly eager to prevent the serial killer from becoming what he is. Ukrainians believe that 'independent Russians' (if they exist at all and have any influence over a fully Putinised society) must first confront the truth within their own ranks and only then – after a genuinely deep and critical self-examination – perhaps attempt some form of 'dialogue.' Until that happens, with few exceptions, Ukrainians refuse to share public space with 'good', ostensibly anti-Putin Russians, a stance that often shocks or even irritates peace-loving Westerners eager to build bridges. In March 2022, PEN Ukraine, seeking to explain this position to an international audience unfamiliar with such reasoning, published an appeal titled *On Dialogue under Bombs*, stating: 'We appreciate the support of those who now speak out against the war… At the same time, we affirm: dialogue about culture under bombs and at gunpoint is impossible. Today, and until the last Russian soldier leaves Ukrainian territory, the only appropriate topic of discussion is stopping Russian war crimes – not Russian culture.' Ukrainian writers explained that their refusal to participate in any events under a shared platform with Russians 'is not about attitudes toward specific individuals, their political views, or their actions.' The problem lies primarily in the symbolic meaning of such gatherings – the misleading signal they send, which aligns perfectly with Western stereotypes of Ukrainian-Russian 'closeness' and trivialises the genocidal war by reducing it to a 'family quarrel' that can supposedly be resolved through insincere 'dialogue' and handshakes. 'This creates the dangerous illusion of a possible "dialogue" between representatives of Ukraine and Russia before the Russian regime has been fully defeated, before Russian war criminals are brought to justice, and before Russia is held accountable for all the crimes it has committed in Ukraine.'[20]

The consistent boycott of joint events with Russians by Ukrainian cultural figures gained particular notoriety in May 2023, when three Ukrainian authors refused to share the stage with three Russian counterparts at PEN World Voices in New York during a public debate on 'victims of tyranny.' The controversy that erupted in American, European, and Ukrainian media over this incident revealed that Ukrainians and Westerners exist in two very different realities – both practically and metaphorically. This can be described as two distinct regimes of truth.

20 PEN Ukraine, *On Dialog While Bombs Are Falling: PEN Ukraine Addresses the Global Intellectual Community*, 18 March 2022, https://pen.org.ua/en/pro-dialog-pid-bombamy-zvernennya-ukrayinskogo-pen-do-mizhnarodnoyi-intelektualnoyi-spilnoty/.

The first truth – the one about war and genocide – is experienced by Ukrainians in real time, with air raid sirens, missile strikes, and daily reports of new destruction and casualties, including among close friends and relatives. The second truth – war as seen on television screens – becomes increasingly monotonous and dull from the perspective of Western audiences. Foreigners do not want to believe that this is genocide because acknowledging it would compel them to take greater action and make moral choices. It is far easier to reassure one another that Ukrainians are exaggerating – that they are simply too traumatised and emotional.

Ignoring Genocide

The international community refuses to acknowledge the explicitly genocidal intent on the Russian side. After all, Putin does not call for the extermination of all Ukrainians as a distinct ethnic group – he is 'only' fighting political enemies ('Nazis'), a social group to which the UN Convention on the Prevention of Genocide does not apply. This is because Stalin's lawyers deliberately excluded social groups from the definition to ensure that the regime could continue eliminating 'class enemies' without restriction. Similarly, the genocide of Ukrainians in 1932–1933 was also framed not as the destruction of an ethnic group but of a social class (the so-called 'kulaks'), and many foreign scholars adhered to this interpretation until recently. From Putin's perspective, Ukrainians do not exist as a nation and, therefore, do not need to be destroyed as a group. To him, they are merely Russians with a slightly distorted consciousness – people who simply need some 'treatment', re-education, and enlightenment. Only those who resist this 'treatment' and insistently affirm their distinct Ukrainian identity are deemed irredeemable and must be eliminated. This, in turn, serves as undeniable proof that they are Nazis – no further evidence is required.

The second truth concerns colonial heritage. For Ukrainians, it is a long history of living in Russia's shadow and under its boot – without their own voice, without a fully recognised language and culture, without a complete national identity, and without political and historical agency. For foreigners, however, it is largely a blend of Russian 'truths' about Ukraine and Russia, a by-product of Russian *imperial knowledge* – a system of narratives that glorifies the empire, justifies its domination over other nations, asserts its supposed civilisational superiority, and marginalises, degrades, and conceals the existence of those under its rule. This 'knowledge' spread across the West as early as the late 18th century, became institutionalised, and retained a dominant position in Western education, academia, culture,

media, popular discourse, and so-called 'common sense.' Westerners have been taught to see Russia, Ukraine, and the entire region through Russian lenses, to interpret them in Russian terms and categories, and to engage in discussions within the discursive frameworks set by Russia. They still struggle to understand Ukrainians' desire to distance themselves as much as possible from Russia – whether 'good' or 'bad' – as a completely natural, albeit long-overdue, step in decolonisation. Even more so, they fail to grasp that this desire has intensified dramatically today, given the existential threat posed by Putin's genocidal regime.

At the core of these misunderstandings lie fundamentally different perceptions of the role that culture can or must play in society – especially the varying awareness of how easily fascist-leaning regimes instrumentalise culture and turn it into a weapon. The idea of culture as an entire way of life, rather than merely the highest achievements of art and literature, is poorly understood in the West. As a result, this lack of awareness prevents a deeper recognition of culture's involvement in and at least partial responsibility for everything happening within Russian society. This explains the persistent desire to separate 'good culture' from 'bad politics', as if there were no connection or mutual influence between them. Similarly, it fuels the effort to distinguish 'good Russians' from 'bad Putinists', absolving the former of any responsibility for Putinism and its genocidal practices. Western discourse often deliberately conflates the notion of collective guilt (which may be legally debatable) with that of collective responsibility (which remains a crucial moral imperative).

Shameful Colonialism

Disregard or lack of awareness regarding colonial heritage and the structural inequality it has created – which continues to place Russia and its culture in a privileged global position at the expense of its former colonies – also contributes to the West's failure to understand Ukrainian arguments. As a result, debates often shift toward condemning supposed 'cultural ostracism' and the total 'collective boycott' of everything Russian, which Ukrainians are accused of imposing on the world. This, in turn, is said to fuel authoritarianism, promote dehumanisation, and incite hostility toward all Russians, including the 'good' ones, effectively making them collateral victims of the boycott. Since these Russians, like Ukrainians, are also considered victims of Putin's regime, they are seen as suffering doubly from the boycott. The very notion of victimhood becomes relativised, and what is, in reality,

a simple, black-and-white relationship between the aggressor and its victim is blurred and fractured into an infinite spectrum of shades of grey.

It is possible that Ukrainians are making a rhetorical misstep by using less-than-ideal terminology such as 'cancel' and 'ban' when referring to Russian culture. In the West, 'cancel culture' has long been a controversial issue, and any mention of 'bans' in the cultural sphere inevitably evokes associations with censorship. A more appropriate and accurate approach would be to speak not of a 'ban',[21] but of a kind of embargo – a suspension, for the duration of the war, of the promotion of Russian cultural products worldwide. As the Lithuanian Minister of Culture wisely suggested, it could be placed under a kind of 'psychological quarantine', allowing for its reassessment after the war with a more critical and decolonising perspective.[22] Nevertheless, Ukrainians are fundamentally right in the most important respect: in a world of nation-states, any national culture, nolens volens, represents its country, reinforces its symbolic power, values, and prestige, and at the same time, often unintentionally, softens and ennobles its negative traits. Culture functions as a national flag – a strong and generally positive symbol of a nation. Promoting Russian culture during the war is nothing less than raising the Russian flag and waving it in public spaces, without proper regard for the criminal and genocidal nature of the State hiding behind it.

Summing up these debates, in which Ukrainian civil society – particularly cultural activists and their organisations – plays a leading role, it must be acknowledged that the appeal to the global community to boycott ('cancel') Russian cultural products and their current creators and promoters has so far met with limited understanding and rather cautious responses from international partners. Beyond the purely financial interests of foreign impresarios keen to promote and sell Russian cultural products, there are also ideological reasons for maintaining a 'business as usual' approach with Russians and legitimising it discursively. First, there is the mistaken perception of culture as a sphere separate from – or even the opposite of – politics, inherently 'humanistic' and 'dialogic.' Second, there is a fundamental lack of understanding of the specific role that culture plays in totalitarian states,

21 Neither Ukraine nor Western countries have introduced any legal bans on consuming Russian cultural products; their promotion and consumption during wartime is not a legal issue but purely a moral one, depending solely on the conscience of artists, society, and cultural impresarios.

22 S. Kairis, *Lithuanian Minister of Culture Simonas Kairis proposed to introduce a 'psychological quarantine' for Russian culture*, *We Are Ukraine*, 11 January 2023, https://www.weareukraine.info/lithuanian-minister-of-culture-simonas-kairis-proposed-to-introduce-a-psychological-quarantine-for-russian-culture/.

where it is systematically used to refine and reflect a more palatable image of ruling regimes, diverting attention from their criminal nature and genocidal actions. Changing this deeply ingrained mindset is a challenging task, and rapid success is unlikely. However, as experience shows, the systematic and coordinated efforts of Ukrainian diplomats, artists, scholars, and civil society activists can, in many cases, yield positive results.

First, what is crucial is maintaining a calm and measured tone in such appeals. It is important to patiently explain that this is not about banning or 'cancelling' specific names or works but rather about a temporary restriction on their dissemination and promotion. This would prevent their instrumentalisation by the Putin regime to elevate its symbolic status and transform culture – a form of soft power – into a brutal, military force. Such 'quarantine' restrictions during wartime are not based on official prohibitions but solely on the moral responsibility of cultural impresarios toward the thousands of victims of a regime that hypocritically parades 'great Russian culture' on its banners and uses it to justify its crimes.

Second, Ukrainians should avoid excessive radicalism and emotionality in these discussions (no matter how difficult it may be under the current circumstances), as this only makes it easier for opponents to dismiss their arguments as overly emotional and therefore not serious. It is essential to clarify that Ukrainians do not reject personal contact with Russians who unequivocally and unconditionally support Ukraine and condemn the Kremlin regime. However, they still prefer not to participate in any joint events with them that might suggest the possibility of 'dialogue and reconciliation' leading to – or replacing – a just resolution of the war. Such events could also fuel stereotypical notions of a Ukrainian-Russian-Belarusian ('East Slavic') community and symbolically reduce a genocidal war to a mere 'family quarrel.' It must be made clear that there is no point in discussing (or listening to) a 'future Russia' as long as Russians, especially the so-called 'good ones,' have not reckoned with Russia's past – not only its repressive and totalitarian history but also its exploitative and colonial legacy.

Third, we must recognise that criticising Russia and Russians by analysing specific works, behaviours, or statements of particular figures is not productive – neither in an academic context nor in propaganda or public discourse (at least from the perspective of a foreign audience). High-quality artistic works, due to their inherently ambiguous nature, are deliberately open-ended and designed to invite further questions and discussions. Dismissing the 'dialogic' nature of art may make it easier to select arguments (and quotes)

that support preconceived analogies and generalisations about the supposed pathologies of the 'Russian soul,' but it also makes such analysis vulnerable to accusations of superficiality and manipulation. There are not many outstanding works in Russian culture that contain openly imperialist statements, which is why critics of its imperial nature often struggle to find explicit evidence. However, the issue is much simpler: the imperial character of Russian culture is most evident not in what it says, but in what it omits, silences, and diminishes. This is why it is far more important to highlight and emphasise that – unlike other European cultures with a colonial-imperial legacy – Russian culture has been and remains utterly deaf and blind to its own heritage. And that, today, is its greatest sin and unatoned guilt.

Ukraine Is Waging an Anti-Colonial Struggle

Interview with Tamara Hundorova

If we examine Ukraine's history since gaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, or even slightly earlier, we can see how dramatic events have shaped contemporary Ukrainian identity. The Revolution on Granite in 1990, the Orange Revolution in 2004, Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014, followed by the occupation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, and finally, Russia's full-scale aggression in 2022 all played important roles. After 2014, we witnessed, at least externally, the process of decommunisation. We may recall the rapid Leninopad,[1] and after 2022, Pushkinopad.[2] Can we say that Ukraine has completely bid farewell to its post-Soviet past, linked to Russian imperialism?

I have the impression that until Maidan, despite all attempts to part ways with the empire, Ukraine was still within the post-Soviet space. It was a transitional period, painful and turbulent. These were rather stages in

Tamara Hundorova is a literary scholar and cultural studies expert, born in 1955 in Poltava Oblast. She graduated in 1977 from the Faculty of Philology at Taras Shevchenko University in Kyiv and, four years later, defended her doctoral dissertation titled *The Problem of Intelligentsia and Nation in the Socio-Psychological Novels of Ivan Franko from the 1880s and 1890s*.
Since 1981 she has worked at the Taras Shevchenko Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (NAS of Ukraine) where she has headed the Department of Literary Theory since 2022. In 1996, she obtained her habilitation with a dissertation titled *The Discourse of Ukrainian Modernism: A Postmodernist Interpretation*.
Her research interests include literary theory, gender studies, postcolonial criticism, postmodernism and Ukrainian literature.

1 Leninopad – the term *Leninopad* (literally 'Leninfall' in Ukrainian) refers to the mass toppling, dismantling, and removal of Lenin monuments in Ukraine, which began during Euromaidan (2013–2014). (All footnotes in the text are provided by the editors.)

2 Pushkinopad – by analogy with *Leninopad*, following the Russian invasion in 2022, Ukraine rapidly removed symbols of Russian and Soviet influence from public spaces. This included dismantling monuments to Russian writers and historical figures, as well as renaming streets.

Professor Hundorova is a corresponding member of the NAS of Ukraine and a research associate at the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University. She is also the dean of the Ukrainian Free University in Munich. Since 2016, she has headed the Ukrainian scholarly publishing institute *Krytyka*.
In 2023–2024, she lectured at Princeton University, and in 2024 at Harvard University. She frequently delivers guest lectures abroad. She is the author of academic monographs on various aspects and phenomena of Ukrainian literature, including the works, activities and influence of Ivan Franko and Olha Kobylianska.
In 2023, her book *Lesia Ukrainka. Books of Sibyl* was published, including a Polish edition.

which we had to rethink many traumatic topics related to our history and our time in the Soviet Union.

For example, the 'discovery' of the Holodomor was a profound experience and a new practice of opening up this topic, of speaking about traumas. I think this entire period was essentially an attempt to feel, define and talk about it. Of course, these issues cannot simply be quickly resolved, and perhaps they will never be fully resolved.

However, I have the impression that the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan marked an end to Ukraine's presence in the post-Soviet world, as both were very radical attempts to break away and move beyond those boundaries. This brought – and continues to bring – important consequences. It also signifies a certain kind of healing within society and a definition of the direction in which it is heading. Moreover, I believe that among post-Soviet states, Ukraine has become the vanguard in addressing many of the issues that other now-independent countries, such as Georgia, Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, are facing or will face in the future.

We are now talking about the past 30-plus years, but in reality, Ukraine's struggle against Russian imperialism has lasted much longer. Let's just recall Mykola Khvylovyi's[3] slogan 'Away from Moscow' from the 1920s, though the origins of this struggle should be traced back to the formation of the Russian Empire. I believe that people abroad may have forgotten or may not even be aware of this long-standing Ukrainian fight against Russian imperialism.

Yes, you mentioned Leninopad, which was a symbolic act, just like Pushkinopad. These are extremely important events and stages in our recent history. But of course, the entire 19th century, perhaps even the late 18th century

3 Mykola Khvylovyi (1893–1933) – representative of the Executed Renaissance, writer and literary critic who advocated for the independence of Ukrainian culture, drawing on Ukrainian history and folklore. He committed suicide to protest against Stalinist terror during the Holodomor.

and the 20th century, was marked by various attempts at the anti-colonial struggle of Ukrainians – through the national liberation idea or the Ukrainian revolution. Later, we had the entire 20th century, especially from the 1920s onwards, when this idea continued to develop. What we have now was shaped by a vast diversity of practices and ideas from various politicians, cultural figures and writers. The fact is that we now perceive this anti-colonial, anti-Russian practice on a single plane, and perhaps, especially during wartime, we are not yet ready to engage in discussions about complex issues, such as the place and role of Ukrainians in the development of the empire itself.

According to my observations in the fields of culture and literature, in the first half of the 19th century – up until Mykhailo Drahomanov[4] – this idea was very important, and Ukrainian literature was interpreted as Little Russian literature. Nevertheless, an important process was taking place at that time: the affirmation of Ukrainian identity and the development of national consciousness. This was evident in the works of Drahomanov and Lesya Ukrainka[5] and was a crucial act of anti-colonial resistance. However, while Khvylovyi and his slogan are well known, his theory was, in fact, highly complex. He remained a communist until the end, and his criticism of Moscow, his idea of an Asian Renaissance, and his concept of a 'psychological Europe' were all developed within a Marxist framework.

Perhaps the time will come when we can return to these issues. But now, of course, the most important matters are the idea of decommunisation and the Russian language. Recently, in various publications, I have been using the term *provincialisation* – the provincialisation of Russia, the provincialisation of the Russian language. I use this term following the concept of *Provincialising Europe* by the prominent decolonisation theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty. It is crucial to understand the extent to which Russian narratives are present in Ukrainian history and our discourse, as well as in Western discourse. For Ukraine, in particular, deconstructing and decentralising these narratives, ideals, and the perception of great Russian literature – constructed since the 19th century as an ideological concept with an imperial character – is of utmost importance.

4 Mykhailo Drahomanov (1841–1895) – philosopher, historian and literary scholar, promoted ideas of decentralisation, national emancipation and the creation of horizontal ties between nations. He collaborated with Polish revolutionaries.

5 Lesya Ukrainka (1871–1913) – poet, writer, literary critic and social activist, considered one of the most outstanding figures in Ukrainian literature. She authored numerous works, including articles on European literature, notably Polish literature.

Turning to the issue of Ukraine's decolonisation, to what extent can it be considered part of the broader history of decolonisation? Or are the differences more significant? I am not sure if you heard the remarks by British Foreign Secretary David Lammy during his visit to Kyiv in September 2024, when he stated in his speech, 'Putin's barbaric actions are the latest example of a very old and dark history.' He also referenced his distant ancestor, who was abducted and forced to serve the empire – most likely alluding to British colonialism.

This is the main issue I have been working on; I am currently finishing a book on this topic. We should not imagine that we are unique and that we are now discovering decolonisation. These processes are very old, having begun in the 20th century, in the post-war period, along with the collapse of the colonial system. At that time, intense debates led to various models and theories of this process.

Ukraine is not discovering decolonisation, but we must understand that we are engaged in this process. If it is to be productive, we need to be familiar with all other practices – African, Asian, South American – as well as the various theories and attempts to process this resistance to the colonial past. I believe this is the key issue. I have been working on it for a long time and these ideas are very important to me.

What else is a challenge? Ukraine is once again bringing the issue of decolonisation to the forefront and making it important. Recently, decolonisation has primarily shifted into the sphere of cultural policy. However, from the very beginning, if we look at various decolonisation theorists, it had a sharp political and military character. That is why it is important to emphasise that decolonisation is not a metaphor, as this idea has recently transformed into a plan for the decolonisation of cuisine, clothing and other aspects of life. It is entirely natural for such practices to emerge, but roles and concepts evolve. This is precisely what Ukraine is doing now: waging an anti-colonial struggle by breaking away from the empire and demonstrating to the world that Russia remains an empire and has never been as innocent as it claimed, even in its cultural sphere. I believe that in this way, we are demonstrating to the world and returning to the shared, fundamental understanding of what decolonisation truly is.

Does applying this terminology to Ukraine simplify the discourse with other countries that have gone through this process? I mean the so-called Global South.

Let me return to Khvylovyi. He argued that new forces, linked to anti-colonial processes, come from Asia, and since Ukraine is located at the border of Asia and Europe, we must be open to the Asian context. This means that today we are speaking about the Global South, although this concept is also, to some extent, highly generalised, as each of these countries has had its own unique experiences. I believe that our openness to the South and the East should be greater. The same applies to solidarity. Unfortunately, to some extent, these opportunities have already been lost, as we are only now realising that this is what we should have been doing.

In the post-war period, Yurii Shevelov[6] attempted to challenge the dominant historical narratives that were popular in Europe at the time, such as those found in the works of Arnold J. Toynbee. Shevelov criticised thinkers like Toynbee for focusing on the old great European powers while overlooking young nations and states, their anti-colonial history and struggles. According to the Ukrainian scholar, this was a mistake, as Ukrainians, for example, could offer a different perspective.

Decolonisation issues are deeply embedded in Ukrainian history, culture and politics. Perhaps they are discussed much less today, yet they remain crucial, especially in the way you mentioned. We must feel this solidarity, understand and support others who continue the process of decolonisation, and recognise that it is all extremely difficult.

You travel abroad frequently and have contact with the academic community. How much has the perception of and attitude towards Ukraine changed in recent years?

These are enormous changes. Ukraine is undeniably visible and is an active player in the global world – its role, place and discovery, as well as the interest in its history and culture, are now evident.

Ukraine has proven to be a country with its own culture, one that is not truly exotic, foreign, incomprehensible or distant. It is no longer blurred within the boundaries of the post-Soviet space, perceived as the same as Russia, because until recently, we were not distinguished at all, not even recognised on the map.

6 Yurii Shevelov (1908–2002) – Ukrainian linguist and Slavic scholar, essayist and literary critic. He left Ukraine in 1943 and, after the war, lived in the United Kingdom and the United States, where he was a professor at Western universities. He published works in *Kultura* in Paris under the pen name Yurii Sherekh.

Unfortunately, due to these difficult and dramatic events, such as the current war, Ukraine has now truly found itself at the centre of attention, revealing itself as vibrant, energetic, culturally rich and fascinating. In a sense, Ukraine is now in the spotlight – in a spiritual, existential and cultural sense – because its cultural life is so active, so engaging. It is about survival and the struggle for existence, and this spiritual creative potential is now manifesting in various forms.

We have folk and folkloric traditions that are now being rediscovered as incredibly valuable and fascinating. A completely new and modern generation of artists has emerged, and it has become clear that we are like others. This discovery – that we are modern like others, that we can engage in discussions and participate in the contemporary world – is, in my opinion, extremely important.

We see the enormous support Ukraine is receiving, and without it, we would be in a much worse situation. This interest also means the discovery of contemporary Ukrainian culture – not out of pity, but because it is genuinely fascinating. Ukraine has become visible in the world and is actively participating in modern global processes.

Now, returning to Ukraine itself – on 19 September 2024, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine voted to change the names of Ukrainian towns and villages.[7] These names were essentially Russian. How significant is this in the context of Ukraine's decolonisation process?

I think it is important, but I have the impression that, to some extent, we are replacing discussions about more serious matters with these attempts at what I call rapid topographical decolonisation. And in this haste, both good and random decisions are being made.

Right now, the priority should be renaming key localities, streets, and institutions, but everything else can wait. We should gather materials, but the renaming process does not need to happen so quickly. It is evident that much of this process is being carried out randomly.

His might be a somewhat provocative question, but during Ukraine's war against Russian aggression, is there time for culture? Can the country afford to fund it? I am referring to state policy. In the 2025 budget

7 The decision concerned 327 localities and 4 districts whose names contained symbols of Russian imperial policy or did not meet the standards of the Ukrainian language. See: Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, Official web portal of the Parliament of Ukraine, https://www.rada.gov.ua/news/razom/253727.html/ (accessed February 10, 2024).

proposal, the government suggested significant cuts to cultural projects. What should be done with culture in times of war?

I understand that the situation is extremely difficult. Ukraine must focus on what is most essential. But culture is important as well – we are talking about cultural diplomacy and cultural activities. For Ukraine, culture is a form of political and anti-colonial resistance, and that cannot be overlooked. Having recently been in Ukraine, I was struck by the vibrant life unfolding there. This, too, is a form of resistance – defying the attempt to erase Ukraine's history, culture, land, and people, which is precisely what Russian aggression seeks to do.

Ukraine's vital energy, which is unfolding and exploding in various spheres, is truly astonishing. That is why it is so important to support different kinds of cultural events in Ukraine. But I also understand budget concerns and current priorities – all of this requires a lot of money, and society is becoming poorer.

The entire volunteer movement is, in fact, another crucial factor in our resistance. It is impressive because volunteering truly emerged during Maidan with new forms of participation and activism. Everyone helps as much as they can – people engage directly, volunteer, or at the very least, donate some money. But unfortunately, these resources are running out. It is becoming increasingly difficult to raise funds, for example, for drones, which is entirely natural. With a prolonged war, funding for culture will inevitably decrease. Sometimes, I even have the impression that too many low-quality books are being published. Perhaps we should be more careful and responsible in this regard.

For many years, in addition to decolonisation issues, you have also been engaged in feminist studies. I may be mistaken, but it seems that feminist research and criticism, which have emerged and continue to develop in Ukraine, are further evidence of the ongoing evolution of the slogan 'Away from Moscow, give us Europe.' Does this also bring Ukraine closer to Europe?

In my opinion, yes, because I remember the 1990s, when the ideas of feminism and gender studies were just emerging. The transformation and shift in consciousness in Ukraine were initiated by feminist criticism or feminist

ideas. It may sound exaggerated, but I recall Solomiia Pavlychko[8] and others, and how active and entirely new this environment was at the time.

And now these ideas are largely accepted in our society. They have appeared in universities, and many people are familiar with them. This is working and connecting us with the world because we are beginning to understand the role of these processes and ideas. Recently, I assigned my students an analysis of a text that mocked patriarchal notions of the ideal wife. When I read their essays, I was struck by how many in this youngest generation – undergraduate students – still did not understand it. It shocked me because I thought such things were already self-evident in state policy, everyday life, and communication. But it turns out they are not. Unfortunately, for some reason, school textbooks still do not devote enough attention to this issue.

So, there is still work to be done?

Yes, there is still a lot to do, and the Ministry of Education should take responsibility. This also involves political and strategic aspects.

In your academic work, you have studied the life and literary legacy of Lesya Ukrainka, completing a book about her just before the full-scale invasion. What aspects of her biography and writings remain relevant for contemporary Ukraine and Ukrainians?

When I was writing this book, and even now, during meetings in Ukraine and abroad, people often say that Lesya Ukrainka sounds so modern and relevant, as if she were our contemporary. Lesya Ukrainka herself once said that while her works were published, they were seldom read and not well understood. Later, in the 1920s, Mykola Zerov observed that it took many years for a reader to emerge who truly grasped her writing. However, I believe that such a reader may only be emerging now.

What is interesting and significant about her? We mentioned feminism, and the feminist idea of women and their role in history and culture was one of the main themes in her work. Indeed, her writings contain more female than male protagonists. She spoke about the many unknown achievements of women throughout history, emphasising the importance of their visibility in both history and culture.

8 Solomiia Pavlychko (1958–1999) – writer and author of works on feminism, a long-time researcher at the Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, where she conducted a seminar on feminist criticism (editor's note).

Still, her ideas in the context of anti-colonial resistance are even more important. When Lesya Ukrainka first travelled to Europe – to Vienna for surgery – she wrote to Mykhailo Drahomanov and her brother, saying that she had felt what freedom and the lack of freedom truly meant. She described feeling the chains of subjugation – referring to the Russian Empire – cutting into her hands until they bled. Later, she even wrote a letter to French intellectuals who had decided to welcome the new Russian tsar upon his arrival in France. Lesya Ukrainka wrote this letter on behalf of a prisoner of the Russian Empire. She accused the French intellectuals of betraying the ideals of liberty and the Parisian Revolution by choosing to greet a new tyrant.

From her earliest years until the end of her life, she consistently raised the issue of Ukraine's place and resistance to all forms of oppression and tyranny. These ideas were extremely important to her. At this point, it is impossible not to mention her poem *Boiarynia*, in which she questioned what it means to be subjugated and what it means to serve an empire that destroys. All of this in Lesya Ukrainka's work sounds incredibly compelling and remains highly relevant to our times.

Interview by Piotr Andrusieczko

Ukrainian Social Mobilisation During the War and Its Impact on Ukraine's Resilience: Reconstruction Perspectives

Maria Repko

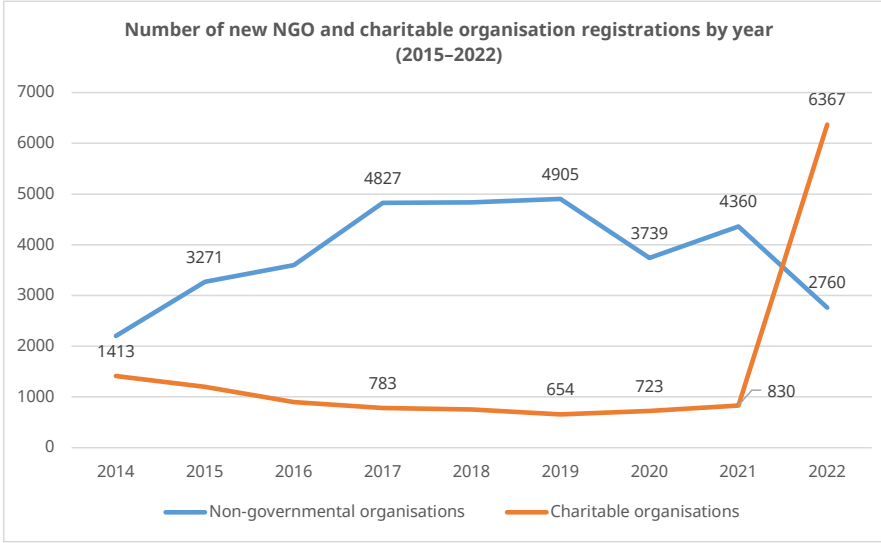
In the early days of the war, after ensuring my family's safety, I found myself helping to coordinate the flow of Western humanitarian aid to Ukraine, despite having no prior experience in logistics or transportation. I worked to connect Western donors with Ukrainian railways and the humanitarian centre in Lviv, organising the delivery of food and supplies on evacuation trains returning from Poland. Soon after, the authorities took over, and I returned to my professional field. This experience mirrors the journey of many Ukrainians, who have adapted to new roles and dramatically changed their lives since the war began.

Ukrainian civil society's immediate answer to the war was jumping into action. The invasion has led to the emergence of grassroots movements, volunteer networks, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have become essential actors in humanitarian aid, advocacy, and reconstruction. From 2021 to 2023, the number of charitable organisations in Ukraine has surged by 43%, while

Maria Repko, Deputy Executive Director of the Centre for Economic Strategy, was born in 1982 in Kyiv. She graduated from two universities, earning a master's degree in management from Vadym Hetman Kyiv National Economic University and a master's degree in finance from the Ukrainian Institute for Capital Market Development.
She began her professional career at UkrSibbank BNP Paribas. From 2006 to 2013, she worked as an analyst at the investment firm Troika Dialog Ukraine, where she was responsible for company research and credit market strategy. She also served as head of the analytical department at Empire State Capital Partners and, from 2014 to 2015, worked at a company managing a large group of Ukrainian enterprises, overseeing shareholder investments in foreign capital markets. Since 2015, she has been working at the Centre for Economic Strategy.
Her research interests include government policies aimed at ensuring macroeconomic stability and the development

of capital markets, including fiscal, monetary, and financial sector policies.

the number of new registrations has jumped from less than a thousand in 2021 to over 6,000 in 2022.[1]



Source: Ukrainian Civil Society under the War by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology

Trust in these organisations has soared, as civil society fills critical gaps left by the State, playing a vital role in maintaining social cohesion. The numbers indicate that people trust volunteers more than their neighbours, and definitely more than governmental institutions.[2] The only higher level of trust is expressed for the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

The Many Hands and Faces of Ukraine's Resilience

Ukraine's resilience has many faces, and more importantly, many hands. Numerous grassroots initiatives have blossomed within the wartime civil society, adding to the resilience and social cohesion of the State at war. Besides the reconstruction, which is the main topic of this essay, frontline support, humanitarian initiatives and advocacy campaigns were what brought the nation together and allowed it to envisage the post-war recovery.

1 *Ukrainian Civil Society under the War. A report based on the findings of the study*, Kyiv 2022–2023, https://ednannia.ua/attachments/article/12447/Ukrainian%20civil%20society%20under%20the%20war.pdf/ (accessed 10 February 2025).

2 *Dynamics of trust in social institutions in 2021–2023*, KIIS, https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1335&page=1/.

Frontline Support

Civil society in Ukraine rapidly mobilised in response to the invasion, with volunteers, donors, and organisations providing direct support to the military and joining volunteer battalions. Efforts have ranged from delivering food and medical supplies to military hospitals,[3] to organising the shipment of protective gear[4] and medical equipment[5] to the front lines. This grassroots response has been underpinned by a high degree of trust from the population: 79% of Ukrainians have donated to civil society movements to meet different types of needs, and 94% of them – at least once to the military.[6]

In the occupied territories, the Evil Mavka[7] movement has gained pace, creating a path of non-violent resistance for women and girls, who spread leaflets and organise other actions. Ukrainian human rights defenders are working to bring back all of the more than 20,000 children who have been deported to Russia.[8]

Civilian Support

Alongside supporting military personnel, civil society and charitable organisations (CSOs) have been at the forefront of humanitarian efforts for civilians, particularly in providing food and shelter and organising evacuations from conflict zones. These efforts have been vital in maintaining social cohesion – shared survival experiences in dangerous areas have strengthened community bonds, as people rely on each other for necessities and emotional support. In addition to assisting with evacuations, many organisations have coordinated animal rescue operations, providing safe homes for pets left behind during evacuations and enhancing a sense of communal responsibility and care. It is notable that almost half of these organisations are regional,[9] where neighbours were helping their fellow neighbours. The biggest surge

3 KOLO Charitable Foundation (Благодійний Фонд 'КОЛО'), https://www.kolo-fund.org/.

4 The Come Back Alive Foundation (Повернись живим), https://savelife.in.ua/.

5 Leleka Foundation, https://www.leleka.care/.

6 Дослідження 'Українці про волонтерство та довіру до благодійних фондів', Кантар, 1 May 2023, https://www.kantar.com/ua/inspiration/public-sector/volunteering-in-ukraine/.

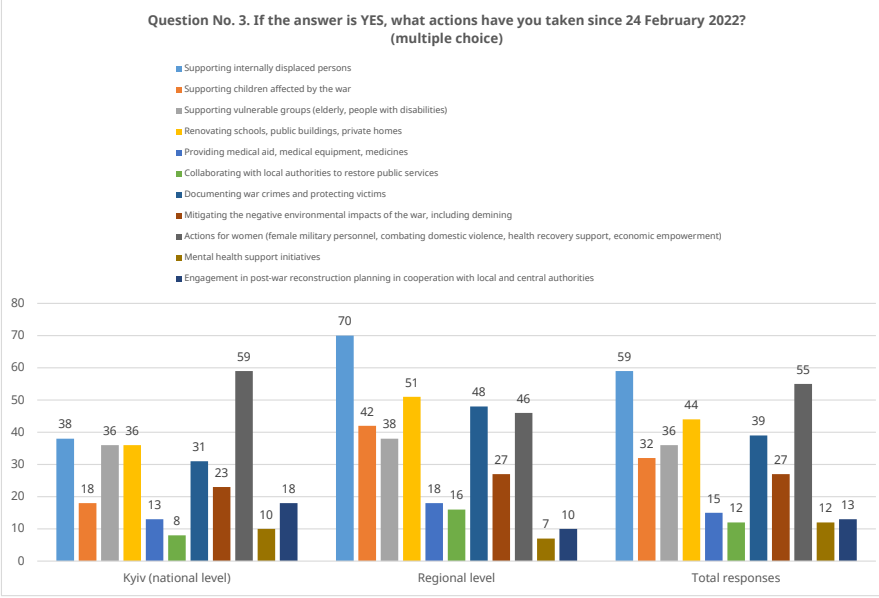
7 The Evil Mavka Women's Partisan Movement (Жіночий партизанський рух 'Зла Мавка'), https://zlamavka.com/.

8 *388 українських дітей повернуто з росії завдяки, зокрема, СОС Дитячі Містечка, SAVE Ukraine, УМПД*, 7 February 2024, https://sos-ukraine.org/novyny/388-ukrayinskyh-ditej-povernuto-z-rosiyi-za-vdyaky-zokrema-sos-dytyachi-mistechka-v-ukrayini-ta-save-ukraine/.

9 Ukrainian Civil Society under the War…

in the number of registered organisations was in the Kherson region – where destruction of the Kakhovka Dam created a humanitarian catastrophe.

National organisations are working actively on post-war recovery planning with local/national authorities, supporting over 5 million internally displaced population (IDP) and other vulnerable groups and physically rebuilding schools, public buildings and private households. Regional organisations are paying more attention to helping IDPs and other vulnerable populations.[10]



Source: Ukraine's wartime recovery and the role of civil society Chatham House survey of Ukrainian CSOs – 2024 update

One of civil society's more complex roles is supporting the reintegration of veterans into Ukrainian society. Many veterans face mental health challenges after their combat experiences, and there is growing concern about the difficulties they might face in reintegration. Public perception of these challenges could impact overall social cohesion. Civil society organisations have begun addressing these challenges by offering psychological support, career counselling, and community reintegration programmes.

10 O. Lutsevych, *Ukraine's wartime recovery and the role of civil society Chatham House survey of Ukrainian CSOs – 2024 update*, June 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/2024-06-05-ukraine-wartime-recovery-role-civil-society-lutsevych.pdf.pdf/.

Advocacy and Informational Campaigns

Beyond direct aid, Ukrainian civil society has played a central role in advocacy and informational campaigns, both locally and internationally. These campaigns are critical in countering Russian disinformation, advocating for financial and military support from international partners, and bolstering community solidarity. Networks of CSOs have used social media, public demonstrations, and international forums to counter disinformation and promote Ukraine's needs globally. They are active in advocating for military and financial aid and seek a stronger voice at the Multi-Agency Donor Coordination Platform.[11]

Physical Reconstruction Efforts and Civil Society's Role

Russia has brought devastation to Ukrainian land, destroying cities and contaminating rich soils. However, if history has taught us anything, it is that life goes on no matter what. Therefore rebuilding, reconstructing and repairing cities and villages became the paramount task from the very first months of the aggression. As soon as Russian troops were forced to leave the northern regions, Ukrainians came back to their homes in Irpin, Bucha, Chernihiv and other cities, and, like thousands of hardworking ants, started to rebuild their homes and lives.

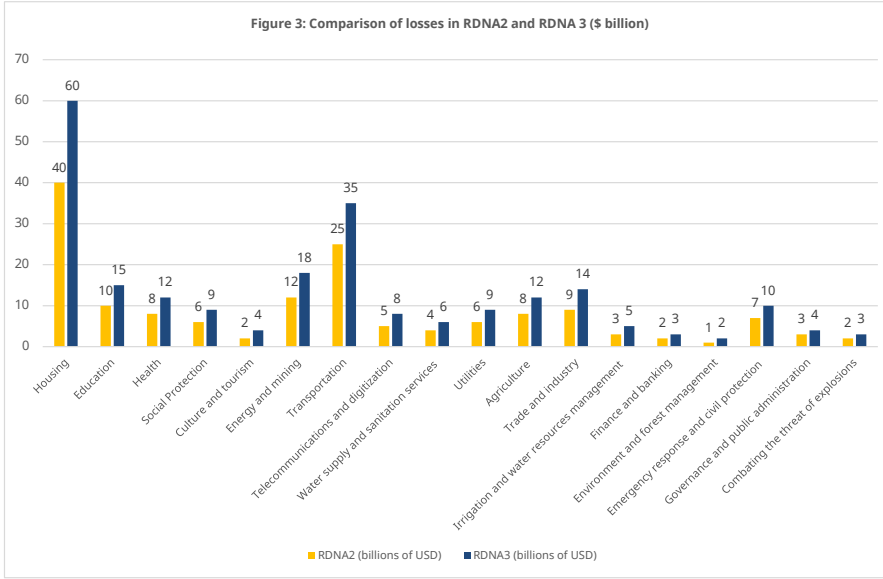
As of December 2023, the total estimated cost for Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery has surged to USD 486 billion.[12] The country faces the immense task of rebuilding its war-damaged infrastructure, restoring essential services, and supporting displaced populations.

Reconstruction needs span critical sectors such as housing, energy, and transport. Naturally, physical reconstruction is primarily managed by the public sector, with most work carried out through government or local procurements. Reconstruction requires alignment with overarching recovery priorities, specialised engineering and construction personnel, and access to significant financial resources – all components typically associated with the public sector or businesses, rather than civil society organisations. However, despite these constraints, volunteers and CSOs have still managed to play a crucial role in these efforts. Amidst the ongoing challenges of war,

11 *Civil Society in Ukraine's Restoration. A Guide to CSOs Mobilizing for a Marshall Plan*, RISE Ukraine, 20 December 2023, https://www.rise.org.ua/materials-en/civil-society-in-ukraines-restoration-a-guide-to-csos-mobilizing-for-a-marshall-plan/.

12 *Ukraine's third Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment RDNA3. February 2022 – December 2023*, World Bank, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099021324115085807/pdf/P1801741bea12c-012189ca16d95d8c2556a.pdf?_gl=1*1n8ld1x*_gcl_au*MzA2NzIwMzEuMTcyNTk5MTU4MA/.

CSOs have mobilised to fill gaps in government capacity, often supported by international partners or local crowdfunding.



Source: evaluation team
Note: x-axis = billions of USD, y-axis=sector under RDNA2 and RDNA3, RDNA2 refers to damage from 24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023, while RDNA3 refers to damage from 24 February 2022 to 31 December 2023

Debris Management and Waste Handling in Ukraine's Reconstruction Efforts

The ongoing war in Ukraine has resulted in massive amounts of construction debris, necessitating a comprehensive approach to waste management as part of the country's reconstruction efforts.[13] A new regulatory framework has been introduced through the **Law on Waste Management**, which prioritises the recycling and reuse of construction materials to reduce environmental impact. The goal is to recycle at least 10% of municipal waste by 2025, with a significant portion coming from construction and demolition debris. The law also emphasises the safe disposal of hazardous materials like asbestos, which is prevalent in many damaged buildings, especially in older public infrastructure. However, the reality is, for the time being, far from the goals that have been set out.

13 *The recovery spending watchdog №5. Special topic: recycling of construction waste*, 18 January 2024, https://ces.org.ua/en/ukraine_reconstruction_recovery_monitoring_ecycling_construction_waste/.

CSOs, private companies, and local governments are playing an increasingly active role in managing and recycling construction waste. Local CSOs gather people to participate in 'tolokas' – communal events where local citizens help collect debris and prepared destroyed homes for reconstruction.[14] Companies such as **Metinvest and ArcelorMittal** have spearheaded efforts to recycle metals, while other organisations handle materials like glass, concrete, and wood. Some regions, such as Kyiv, have established dedicated debris processing centres to streamline the recycling process and reduce landfill use. In contrast, less developed areas are still struggling to implement such programmes, often defaulting to traditional disposal methods.

Ukraine's approach to debris management still needs to be aligned with international best practices, drawing lessons from post-war reconstruction in Europe, as well as creating scientifically sound ways to use the debris in new construction and creating a relevant legislative base. Moving forward, Ukraine is committed to expanding its recycling infrastructure and promoting sustainable reconstruction practices.

While volunteers facilitated by some CSOs are working to remove physical debris from construction sites,[15] other organisations are acting on a higher level, actively advocating for green recovery and promoting circular economy principles in Ukraine through advocacy campaigns, educational forums, seminars, and events. For example, ReThink CSO became the partner of New European Bauhaus in Ukraine and is involved in advocating smart regulation for using debris in the reconstruction of Ukraine.[16]

Housing Restoration

Housing is one of the sectors most affected by the war, with over 20% of the country's housing stock either damaged or completely destroyed.[17] Nearly 2 million households have been impacted, resulting in housing losses valued at USD 60 billion. The estimated cost for housing reconstruction over the next decade is projected to be USD 80 billion, of which USD 2.1 billion is needed in 2024 alone to meet immediate housing needs. At the same time, according to the available statistics, so far only 1% of the destroyed housing

14 https://bravetorebuild.in.ua/en/.

15 The Brave to Rebuild Foundation (Благодійний фонд 'Сміливі Відновлювати'), https://bravetorebuild.in.ua/en; Volunteering Ukraine, https://www.volunteeringukraine.com/en/volunteer-opportunities/repair-together/.

16 ReThink, https://www.rethink.com.ua/about/.

17 *The recovery spending watchdog no. 8. Special topic: residential recovery*, 25 April 2024, https://ces.org.ua/en/the-recovery-spending-watchdog-%e2%84%968-special-topic-residential-recovery/.

stock has received funding either within the compensation programmes for households or as a part of centralised reconstruction efforts.

To address these challenges, the **Ministry for Restoration** has spearheaded housing policy reforms aimed at increasing the availability of social housing and supporting the rebuilding of homes for displaced persons. Public and private entities, such as the **Recovery Agency**, local governments, and international donors, are all contributing to the effort. Notably, private homeowners are playing a role by funding the reconstruction of their properties, often with support from initiatives like **United24** and international and Ukrainian charity foundations.

However, significant gaps remain in the housing sector. Ukraine's social housing stock is critically low, which limits the government's ability to provide immediate assistance to internally displaced persons. The ongoing discussions around housing policy reforms aim to tackle these issues by ensuring compensation mechanisms for destroyed properties, improving access to state support programmes, and creating a new paradigm of state-owned social housing after the pattern of European countries. Meanwhile, volunteers, CSOs and ordinary people are trying to help IDPs get a roof over their heads, fundraising and attracting donors who build module houses and help reconstruct apartments and homes. The CSOs Brave to Rebuild and Repair Together are working on housing reconstruction projects, from debris removal to full reconstruction with the help of many volunteers.[18] They believe that this not only helps affected people to regain their homes but also favours social cohesion, by making strangers work together in the darkest of times for the common good.

Healthcare Restoration

Ukraine's healthcare system has faced severe disruption due to the war, with over 1,600 medical facilities damaged or destroyed as of mid-2024.[19] Of these, 390 facilities have sustained more than 50% damage, significantly hampering access to basic and specialised healthcare services in affected regions. However, restoration efforts are ongoing. The Ministry of Health, along with various governmental and international partners, has restored

18 The Brave to Rebuild Foundation, Volunteering Ukraine.

19 *The recovery spending watchdog no. 11. Special topic: how medical facilities are rebuilt*, 30 July 2024, https://ces.org.ua/en/the-recovery-spending-watchdog-%e2%84%9611-special-topic-how-medical-facilities-are-rebuilt/.

over 500 medical facilities across multiple oblasts, with a particular focus on Mykolaiv, Dnipro, and Kyiv.

Funding for healthcare reconstruction has come from multiple sources, including **United24**, an international fundraising platform, which raised USD 300 million to help rebuild key hospitals, including the National Children's Specialised Hospital, **Okhmatdyt**. Over two days, Ukrainians donated over EUR 6.5 million to Okhmatdyt restoration with the support and facilitation of patient organisations and charitable foundations. International donors have provided critical medical equipment, and temporary modular hospitals have been established in frontline and recently liberated areas.

In the recently de-occupied territories, the charitable foundation Patients of Ukraine, one of the largest pre-war patient organisations, decided to step in where the destruction was most severe. With donor funding, they have successfully reconstructed 46 outpatient clinics. They assessed the need for reconstruction based on the number of patients and focused their efforts on rebuilding clinics in hromadas where the need was greatest.[20] Another option is mobile clinics, which provide temporary access to healthcare in hromadas where reconstruction of outpatient clinics is currently impossible. Despite the fact that both mobile clinics and reconstructed outpatient clinics have repeatedly been targeted by Russian missiles, access to healthcare remains a crucial prerequisite for life in high-risk areas. CSOs, in collaboration with the government, are prioritising this need.

The other challenges remain relevant. While significant resources have been allocated to restoring healthcare facilities, not all reconstruction projects align with modern principles of accessibility and energy efficiency. Moving forward, there is a push to integrate energy-efficient technologies, like solar panels, into new healthcare facilities to ensure long-term sustainability. Moreover, many regional facilities need to focus on increasing healthcare access for displaced populations and providing mental health support to war-affected communities.

Education Restoration

The war has severely disrupted Ukraine's education sector, with thousands of schools damaged or destroyed across the country. As of mid-2024, reportedly over 3,800 educational facilities were destroyed or damaged, significantly

20 Patients of Ukraine, https://patients.org.ua/en/.

affecting access to education for millions of students and pupils. Less than 800 or 20% of them were rebuilt.[21]

One of the most significant initiatives in the education sector recovery is the integration of bomb shelters into school buildings, a measure designed to ensure student safety in the face of ongoing conflict and renew access to offline education.

CSOs and charitable foundations are very active on this front, with the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) Foundation[22] and the SaveED[23] being good examples. By rebuilding schools, constructing shelters and repurposing other premises, these two organisations alone reportedly have helped over 75,000 kids to return to offline classes. While the KSE is focusing on bomb shelters, allowing underground education in risky areas, SaveEd is working with the smallest towns and villages to ensure access to education in places that are available but not necessarily designed to be schools, e.g. repurposing local cultural clubs or libraries.

In addition to the physical rebuilding of schools, attention is being given to providing psychological support to students who have experienced trauma during the war, access to books and study materials and other types of educational activities.

Despite these efforts, the recovery of the education sector faces challenges. The speed of reconstruction is slower than anticipated due to funding gaps, safety concerns and logistical challenges in war-affected areas.

Among the major obstacles, the CSOs working on physical reconstruction highlight the lack of funding, the lack of personnel, especially engineers and construction workers, sometimes inferior cooperation with local authorities and mixed signals on where and which help is most needed. These are hard problems to overcome in the field. Support from the international community could help immensely in terms of donor funding, foreign construction companies sharing expertise with volunteers and participating in joint efforts to rebuild Ukraine. Enhanced cooperation with civil society at the local level, as well as conscious promotion of such cooperation on the central

21 *The recovery spending watchdog no. 12. Special topic: restoring educational facilities*, 29 August 2024, https://ces.org.ua/en/recovery_spending_watchdog_12_restoring_educational_facilities/.

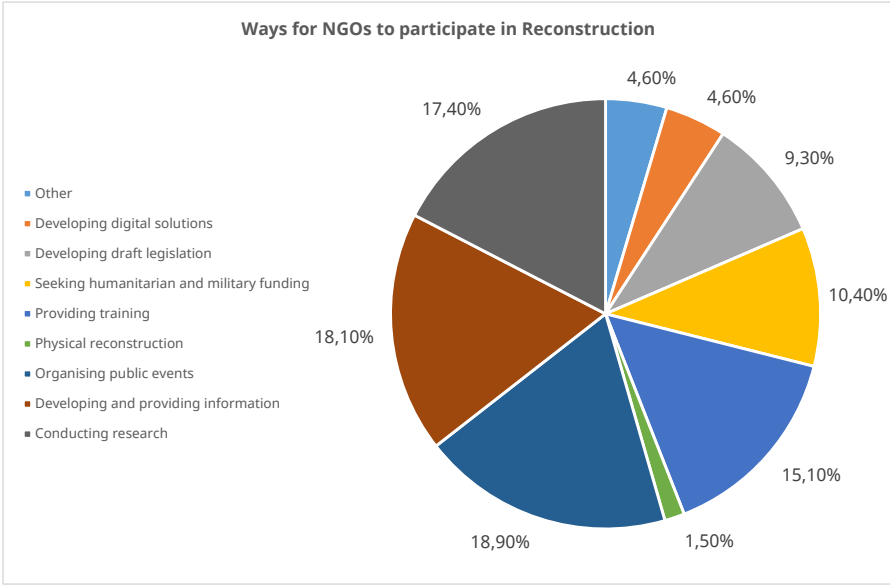
22 Ibid.

23 *Donors Guide Book: a joint material of RISE Ukraine and the Institute of Analytics and Advocacy*, RISE Ukraine, 28 May 2024, https://www.rise.org.ua/materials-en/donors-guide-book-a-joint-material-of-rise-ukraine-and-the-institute-of-analytics-and-advocacy/.

level, could help not only achieve better reconstruction but also boost social cohesion and nation-building in Ukraine.

Civil Society's Role in Advocacy for a Better and People-oriented Reconstruction and Recovery

However, the models for institutionalised civil society organisation participation in recovery efforts are mainly analytical, advocacy-oriented or connected with helping local communities with fundraising and dealing with bureaucratic issues.[24]



Source: Civil Society in Ukraine's Restoration. A Guide to CSOs Mobilizing for a Marshall Plan

Delivering Digital Solutions

One of the most significant contributions of Ukrainian civil society to the reconstruction process has been the development and promotion of digital solutions that enhance transparency and accountability. The RISE Ukraine Coalition, a network of civil society organisations (CSOs), has been at the forefront of advocating for digital tools that ensure public oversight and reduce corruption in the reconstruction process. Their advocacy led to the creation of the DREAM (Digital Restoration Ecosystem for Accountable Management) platform, a comprehensive digital ecosystem for reconstruction

24 *Civil Society in Ukraine's Restoration. A Guide to CSOs Mobilizing for a Marshall Plan*, RISE Ukraine, 20 December 2023, https://www.rise.org.ua/materials-en/civil-society-in-ukraines-restoration-a-guide-to-csos-mobilizing-for-a-marshall-plan/.

management. Originally a grassroots initiative, DREAM has since been adopted by the government as a centralised tool for tracking all reconstruction projects and collecting detailed information about each one. This digital platform allows citizens and CSOs to monitor progress in real-time, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently and transparently, while also providing an additional layer of accountability to prevent corruption.[25]

International and Ukrainian Advocacy for People-oriented Recovery

Beyond digital innovations, Ukrainian CSOs such as, for example, RISE Ukraine and the consortium Resilience, Reconstruction and Relief for Ukraine (RRR4U) have been vocal in advocating for a recovery process that prioritises people's needs in major European capitals as well as via online events and direct contacts. They emphasise the importance of people-oriented recovery, ensuring that reconstruction is not just about rebuilding physical infrastructure but also about restoring communities, providing housing, and ensuring social protection. A lot of Ukrainian CSOs have worked alongside international partners to lobby for financial and political support that aligns with the principle of 'building back better.' This approach focuses on sustainability, inclusivity, and creating a future for Ukraine that is more resilient and equitable.

The RISE Ukraine Donors Guidebook,[26] for example, serves as a comprehensive resource for international donors looking to contribute to Ukraine's reconstruction. It outlines key challenges and opportunities across eight thematic areas, including environment and green recovery, decentralisation, volunteering, healthcare, education, architecture, as well as integrity and transparency. The guidebook emphasises the importance of transparency, public oversight, and leveraging digital solutions such as the DREAM platform to ensure accountability in reconstruction efforts. The RRR4U Ukraine Recovery Cookbook[27] provides a practical framework for guiding Ukraine's reconstruction efforts, using a metaphorical 'kitchen' to outline

25 *The Ministry for Restoration and the RISE Ukraine Coalition presented the communication platform of the digital ecosystem for reconstruction management DREAM*, https://www.rise.org.ua/blog/the-ministry-for-restoration-and-the-rise-coalition-presented-the-communication-platform-of-the-digital-ecosystem-for-reconstruction-management-dream/.

26 *Donors Guide Book: a joint material of RISE Ukraine and the Institute of Analytics and Advocacy*, RISE Ukraine, 28 May 2024, https://www.rise.org.ua/materials-en/donors-guide-book-a-joint-material-of-rise-ukraine-and-the-institute-of-analytics-and-advocacy/.

27 *Ukraine Recovery Cookbook*, RRR4U Coalition, https://rrr4u.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/11/rrr4u_ukraine_recovery_cookbook_2023_en.pdf/.

the key ingredients and processes necessary for a successful recovery. The document emphasises core principles such as transparency, trust, private sector engagement, and compliance with EU standards. It advocates for a people-centred approach, where local communities are actively involved in decision-making to ensure that recovery efforts meet their specific needs.

In their international advocacy efforts, CSOs have also emphasised the importance of local community engagement in the recovery process. By ensuring that recovery projects respond directly to the needs of affected populations, they advocate for a recovery process that addresses housing, healthcare, education, and social cohesion, while also integrating the voices of marginalised groups. This people-oriented approach not only helps rebuild communities but also strengthens Ukraine's long-term resilience.

Civic Monitoring of Reconstruction

Ukrainian CSOs have been actively involved in civic oversight of government-led reconstruction efforts, working to ensure that resources are directed where they are most needed. This civic monitoring role includes scrutinising reconstruction projects to ensure they meet the needs of communities and that they are executed with integrity and transparency. Patients of Ukraine, for instance, has played a significant role in overseeing healthcare infrastructure projects,[28] ensuring that new and rebuilt clinics meet the needs of the population and are distributed fairly across the country. Transparency International actively works on monitoring the reconstruction efforts in Ukraine.[29]

To further strengthen public oversight, the Recovery Spending Watchdog Project[30] was launched with the support of the European Union, providing a platform for civic monitoring of the largest reconstruction initiatives. This project includes the civil society reconstruction monitoring platform called the Big Recovery Portal,[31] which serves as a public repository for information about ongoing recovery projects, allowing citizens and watchdog groups to track progress and flag concerns.

By leveraging these tools, civil society advocates for a recovery that is both transparent and accountable, safeguarding the interests of the people and

28 Resilience, Reconstruction and Relief for Ukraine, https://rrr4u.org/en/.

29 Відбудова, Transparency International Ukraine, https://ti-ukraine.org/en/ti_format/reconstruction/.

30 Centre for Economic Strategy, https://ces.org.ua/en/category/project-en/costs-control-en/.

31 *Civil monitoring of Ukraine's recovery*, Big Recovery Portal, https://brp.org.ua/en/.

fostering trust in the reconstruction process. Numerous challenges need to be addressed, including poor data quality and, surprisingly, a significant lack of transparency in donor-funded projects. Without access to information on donor-funded reconstruction, it becomes nearly impossible for civil society monitors to evaluate progress across different sectors and regions, making it difficult to identify which areas require the most effort and attention.

The Future Role of Civil Society in Ukraine's Post-War Recovery

As Ukraine moves from the immediate demands of war to the long-term challenges of post-war recovery, civil society organisations will continue to play a crucial role in shaping the country's future. One of the key issues is the need to improve trust between society and political institutions to foster Ukrainian nation-building after the war. Mistrust in government institutions has hindered cooperation, but CSOs can help bridge this gap by promoting transparency and accountability in the recovery process.

Ukraine's path to EU membership will also be partly shaped by the efforts of CSOs, particularly in implementing the principles of the EU's Green Deal and the New European Bauhaus in reconstruction. These initiatives emphasise sustainable and inclusive reconstruction, which aligns with the 'build back better' approach.

Finally, CSOs will play a key role in advocating for post-war justice and the use of Russian assets for Ukraine's recovery. Many Ukrainian civil society actors are pushing for the confiscation of Russian assets frozen abroad to be redirected to fund the country's reconstruction. This international advocacy will be crucial in ensuring that those responsible for the destruction in Ukraine contribute to the rebuilding process.

Through these various efforts, CSOs will remain integral to Ukraine's recovery, ensuring that the nation's future is built on transparency, sustainability, and justice.

Conclusion

As Ukraine moves forward in its journey of recovery and reconstruction, the role of civil society has proven to be indispensable. Civil society organisations have stepped up to bridge gaps left by the State, providing immediate support, advocating for transparency, and ensuring that the rebuilding process is people-centred and inclusive. From mobilising volunteers for debris removal to leveraging digital platforms like DREAM for transparent reconstruction monitoring, CSOs have played a pivotal role in ensuring that

reconstruction is not only efficient but also accountable. Through active participation in reconstruction, social cohesion initiatives, and international advocacy, civil society will help ensure that Ukraine's recovery process not only rebuilds what was lost but also lays the foundation for a more prosperous and democratic future.

Justice is a Prerequisite for Lasting Peace

Interview with Oleksandra Matviichuk

In December 2022, in one of your interviews, you said: 'I did not see a demand for justice in Europe. I saw a demand for peace.' You often travel abroad. Has the perception of what is happening in Ukraine following the Russian aggression changed since then?

It is important to understand the difference in perspectives. Quite often, people living in stable democratic societies equate peace with justice. They say that in order to achieve peace, one must make concessions on justice, but they have no experience of the tragedies that countries endure during armed conflicts. However, we, as people who are now fighting for the right to live, cannot afford that. For decades, Russia has used war as a means of achieving its political interests and war crimes as a way to win those wars. For decades, Russia has committed horrific crimes in Chechnya, Moldova, Georgia, Mali, Libya and Syria. It has never been punished for this, which is why Russians are convinced they can do whatever they want. So when we talk about peace and justice, justice is in fact a prerequisite for lasting peace.

Has this become more widely recognised abroad?

Oleksandra Matviichuk was born in 1983 near Kyiv. The future head of the Centre for Civil Liberties became interested in human rights while still in school. As she herself points out, her acquaintance with Yevhen Sverstiuk,[1] a notable representative of the Sixtiers[2] movement, played a significant role in shaping her views. During her university years, she began conducting human rights training sessions. In 2007, Matviichuk assumed leadership of the newly established Centre for Civil Liberties in Kyiv. In 2010 and 2020,

1 Yevhen Sverstiuk (1927–2014) was a Ukrainian dissident, literary critic, essayist, poet, philosopher, participant of the Sixtiers movement, president of the Ukrainian PEN Club, and political prisoner of the Soviet regime (source: Wikipedia).

2 The Sixtiers (Ukrainian: Шістдесятники, romanised: Shistdesiatnyky; 'people of the 60s') were a new generation of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, who entered the cultural and political life of the USSR during the late 1950s and 1960s, after the Khrushchev Thaw. The Sixtiers were distinguished by their liberal and anti-totalitarian views (source: Wikipedia).

the organisation reported on protests in Belarus and provided assistance to Belarusian political prisoners.
After the violent dispersal of students on 30 November 2013 at Maidan in Kyiv, the centre launched the Euromaidan SOS initiative, which provided legal assistance to those affected during the protests. In the following years, the organisation focused on monitoring political persecution in Crimea and Donbas. It initiated international campaigns advocating for the release of Ukrainian political prisoners held by Russia. At the same time, the centre actively monitored and supported judicial reforms and human rights legislation in Ukraine.
Following the Russian aggression, the organisation began documenting Russian war crimes. In October 2022, the Centre for Civil Liberties was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize alongside Belarusian human rights defender Ales Bialiatski and the Russian organisation Memorial.

There is a shift taking place abroad, and it is not just about justice but also about the nature of Russian aggression. Western democracies are beginning to see the obvious: that Russia is an empire, and an empire has a centre but no borders – it is inherently expansionist. This means that if we do not stop Putin in Ukraine, he will go further.

When we interview people who have survived captivity, they say that Russians spread a particular message: first, we will take Ukraine, and then we will go together with you to conquer other countries. On Russian television, public discussions are taking place about who will be next – Poland, Estonia or Latvia. The process of forcibly mobilising Ukrainian citizens into the Russian army has been ongoing for years in the occupied territories. Therefore, whether democratic countries have the courage to admit it or not, they are safe precisely because Ukrainians are still fighting.

You have already said that holding Russia accountable for its crimes is a matter of justice. But at this moment, justice seems to be a broader concept – it also includes military aid so that Ukraine can defend itself against aggression. You have also advocated for arms supplies to Ukraine.

I never imagined my legal career would look like this. But now, as a human rights lawyer, I find myself in a situation where I have no legal tools to stop Russian atrocities. Russian forces deliberately destroy residential buildings, museums, schools, hospitals, kindergartens and churches. They shell evacuation corridors, torture people in filtration camps, ban the use of the Ukrainian language and culture in occupied territories, forcibly deport Ukrainian children to Russia to raise them as Russians. They kill, torture, rape and rob people in occupied areas, while the entire UN system – with its vast architecture of international organisations, mandates, special rapporteurs and working groups – is simply unable to stop it.

To be clearer, let me recall an image that many will remember – the bodies of civilian residents lying in the streets of Bucha until the town was liberated. We found the bodies of civilians, both women and men, in the yards of their own homes. We found them in mass graves, with their hands tied behind their backs. We found them in civilian cars – entire families shot dead as they tried to evacuate their children from dangerous areas. These people had no weapons. This is how Russia treats unarmed people. And the right to self-defence is a legitimate right under the entire UN system, yet it is very difficult to exercise without weapons. You cannot fight an aggressor with bare hands.

How do you assess the work related to investigations into Russian war crimes? Most people associate war crimes with the killing of civilians, as happened in Bucha, with torture, but there is more to it, correct?

I will give an example that is not entirely obvious – religious persecution in the occupied territories. The world knows very little about it. In the past two years alone, Russia has deliberately destroyed or severely damaged more than 500 religious buildings – churches, temples, synagogues and mosques. Russia engages in illegal practices such as abductions, torture, sexual violence and the killing of religious activists and representatives of various churches, faiths and religious organisations that do not belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, which, as everyone knows, is fully controlled by the State. Just a few months ago, the Russians abducted Father Stepan Podolchak from the occupied town of Kalanchak in Kherson Oblast. They came to his home, turned everything upside down, dragged him out with a bag over his head, barefoot, and two days later told his wife that he had died. They tortured him to death simply because he refused to hand over the church where he served to the Russian Patriarchate, saying that he could not betray his vows or his faith. The world knows very little about this. On the contrary, for some reason, some people believe that Russia is a deeply religious country. Russia deliberately creates this image because this war also has a values-based dimension. Russia presents itself as a defender of traditional values, yet in reality, it defends only Putin's and his inner circle's right to plunder both their own country and the territories they have seized. And in doing so, they destroy Catholics, Christians of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Muslims and other faiths, churches and religious organisations.

This number is, of course, constantly changing, but do we have a figure for documented Russian war crimes?

These data are not complete, but they do exist. When the full-scale invasion began, we and our partners launched the initiative Tribunal for Putin. We united dozens of organisations from different regions, covering the entire country with a network of documenters, including in the occupied areas. We work according to a single methodology and have set an ambitious goal – to document every criminal episode committed in even the smallest village of every oblast. At present, our database contains 80,000 incidents from the past two years. This is an enormous number – 80,000 human stories, individual fates. But this is only the tip of the iceberg because, for Russia, committing crimes is a method of waging war.

The international public does not always grasp the level of brutality and cruelty that go beyond the values of an ordinary person living in a developed democracy. In reality, this is a highly pragmatic tool. I call it the instrumentalisation of pain. It means inflicting such suffering on the civilian population that people simply no longer have the strength to resist and say: this is the end, we cannot take it any longer, do with us as you wish. It is a form of learned helplessness, a phenomenon studied and described by psychologists in the past century. I have the impression that Russia is now attempting to carry out this horrific experiment of learned helplessness on all of us in Ukraine so that we simply lack the strength to fight.

So it is about breaking the spirit of resistance and perseverance?

Yes. This is also very evident in captivity. What is the purpose of beating, raping and abusing people who are already imprisoned? It is simply intended to break their identity so that even if they are eventually released, they will never be able to defend themselves again.

You have already spoken a little about the work of the Centre for Civil Liberties.[1] We see that Russian war crimes are being investigated not only by law enforcement bodies, including international ones, but also by NGOs and journalists. To what extent can the work of your organisation and your colleagues contribute to justice?

Every day, we document crimes against humanity – not just for national archives. I have great respect for the work of historians, and it is important to record events as they are so that the memory of what we have experienced remains, along with the generations who have lived through it. We will have not just interpretations but facts. And we are documenting them. But we do

1 See: https://ccl.org.ua/en/ (accessed 10 February 2025).

so primarily so that every person who has suffered due to Russian aggression has a chance for justice. That is why we pass this information on to the International Criminal Court and the International Commission of Inquiry established by the UN Human Rights Council. We also cooperate with experts from the OSCE's Moscow Mechanism and national investigative bodies. We are very committed to ensuring that what we have documented is used both internationally and nationally – not only for investigations but also for providing information and assessing what is happening.

In September 2024, the International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine presented a report to the UN General Assembly on crimes committed by Russia. We met with members of this commission and handed over the cases we had recorded.

I understand that you document these crimes using a specific methodology so that such testimonies can later be used in investigations and trials?

Of course, such a methodology must not only be specialised but also standardised. We all work according to the same methodology so that everything can be integrated into a single database, which now contains 80,000 cases. However, I am aware that not everything will be used as evidence in international or national courts. Many pieces of information, including those that may indicate crimes, might not meet the admissibility criteria. But that is also fine, because in any case, all this information is necessary for the investigation – to reconstruct the full picture of what happened and, in doing so, understand what evidence is still needed and where to collect it.

Do you believe the international community has the necessary power to hold Putin accountable? We saw his impunitive visit to Mongolia, a member of the International Criminal Court, and it seemed like a blow to the reputation of international justice…

Well, it is not the first time. International criminal justice is, in general, a very young branch of international law. The International Criminal Court has not existed for that long – it is younger than the UN. And we can recall a precedent from another part of the world when Sudan's president, Omar al-Bashir, despite being indicted by the ICC for genocide in Darfur, travelled to various countries in Africa and Asia for 10 years. He visited Kenya, South Africa, Jordan and Djibouti – all of which are ICC members and were obligated to arrest him, but they did not. There is law, and there is politics. As human rights lawyers, we strive to ensure that the law prevails over political

interests, but we do not live in a perfect world, and it does not always work. Unfortunately, the ICC does not have the tools to respond to such violations. It can appeal to the UN Security Council, which, in our case, is pointless because Russia has veto power, blocking the Security Council entirely for us. It can also turn to the General Assembly. There are also other ways to influence such situations – not only to make them precedents of violation but also to set a precedent for how a country can be held accountable for breaching its own obligations.

A simple example – there is an agreement between Mongolia and the European Union. Under this agreement, the EU funds a range of programmes. We need to raise the issue of terminating or limiting them. A country should feel that it is a matter of choice: if it does not uphold its international obligations, it will face negative consequences.

What kind of tribunal should be established for Putin and for Russian crimes? I ask because you raised this issue as early as 2016. Back then, you spoke about the possibility of establishing hybrid international tribunals. The situation was completely different then – it concerned Crimea and the war in Donbas. But what would it look like now?

There are four types of international crimes: war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and the crime of aggression. Russia is committing all four, and I am convinced that this war is genocidal in nature because Russia explicitly states – and Putin writes in his pseudo-historical articles – that there is no Ukrainian nation, no Ukrainian language, no Ukrainian culture. For 10 years, we have documented how these words have been translated into horrifying practice and concrete actions – let me reiterate – when active individuals such as journalists, mayors, priests, musicians and teachers are deliberately, physically eliminated, when Ukrainian cultural heritage is looted and destroyed, when the Ukrainian language and culture are banned, and when Ukrainian children are deported to Russia to be raised as Russians. To me, this is clearly part of a genocidal policy aimed at destroying the Ukrainian nation and its identity. At present, there is no international court that can prosecute Putin and his inner circle for the crime of aggression. This crime is also referred to as a crime against peace – for violating peace and launching an aggressive war. Everything we document, everything I have mentioned, is a consequence of their decision to start this war. If we want to prevent future wars, we must demonstrate that countries and their leaders who initiate such wars will be punished. This seems like common sense, yet in the entire history of humanity, we have had only one precedent.

These were the tribunals in Nuremberg and Tokyo in the 20th century. They were courts of the victors, as they prosecuted war criminals whose regimes had collapsed. We live in a new century, which means that our generation has new responsibilities. We must go further and establish a precedent for punishing crimes against peace, regardless of how and when this war ends. We cannot wait – and we certainly cannot make justice dependent on the strength of Putin's regime. This is our historical task. And when I say *our*, I do not mean only Ukrainians.

When it comes to other types of crimes, I would like to point out that the International Criminal Court is doing very important work, but it will focus on a few selected cases. This means that hundreds of thousands of people who have suffered remain beyond its scope. The responsibility for investigating 98% of what the Russians have done still lies with national investigations and courts. I have not seen the latest figures, but recently the Office of the Prosecutor General announced that it is conducting over 136,000 criminal proceedings for war crimes. You do not need to be a lawyer to understand how overwhelming this burden is. Even the best legal system in the world could not handle it – and Ukraine is far from having such a system. This means that everything we discussed in 2015–2016 about integrating an international component into national investigations and justice remains relevant. We need to develop a kind of vaccine to strengthen the capacity of the national system through international involvement and thus manage this challenge. In practice, this means a model where national investigators cooperate with international investigators, and national judges work alongside international judges.

Many years ago, you also urged the Ukrainian authorities to ratify the Rome Statute. In August 2024, the Verkhovna Rada did so. What does this mean for Ukraine in terms of the pursuit of justice and holding war criminals accountable?

This is truly a historic step. It defines the kind of Ukrainian state we want to build – a democratic state where the rights of every person are protected. I was the first person to raise this issue at Maidan. I was the coordinator of the Euromaidan SOS initiative, and we worked around the clock. Together with thousands of volunteers who joined the initiative, we provided legal assistance to persecuted protesters.

At that time, the pro-Russian authoritarian regime of President Viktor Yanukovych[2] was engaged in systematic and organised repression. Every day, we dealt with hundreds of people who were beaten, arrested, tortured and charged in fabricated criminal cases. We found ourselves in a situation where the law was not functioning, and we had no one to turn to for justice in terms of prosecuting those who gave the orders and committed these crimes with their own hands because Ukraine had signed the Rome Statute but had not ratified it. The International Criminal Court acts as a kind of sword of Damocles hanging over every country as a reminder that if international crimes are committed and the authorities are unwilling or unable to investigate them, international justice will step in. This is extremely important even beyond the context of Russian aggression, as it serves as a constant reminder to any government – regardless of political affiliation – that one cannot shoot more than a hundred peaceful demonstrators at Maidan with impunity. Even if the police, courts and security services are under control, the international criminal justice system will open cases against those responsible.

You recently launched an initiative to strip Russia of its membership in the UN General Assembly. This initiative was supported by more than 20 former ministers from Latin American countries. It is clear that Ukraine places significant importance on diplomacy with the so-called Global South. How crucial is their support when it comes to delivering justice and holding Russia accountable?

This strategic task requires time and effort because we live in a highly interconnected world. A decision has now been made to establish a special tribunal for the crime of aggression, which we discussed within the Council of Europe, as we still do not have the two thirds majority in the UN General Assembly needed to create such a tribunal at the global level. So, we plan to establish it at the regional level. Moreover, war has various dimensions, including an economic one. Missile attacks against Ukraine continue. I live in Kyiv, and my city, like many others, is constantly bombarded by Russian missiles and Iranian drones. Russia is able to buy and produce missiles and drones because it has money. It continues to trade with countries that claim to take a so-called neutral position, but in reality, in my view, they are simply indifferent to violations of international law and human suffering. Our task

2 Viktor Yanukovych (1950–) is a Ukrainian (until 2014) and Russian politician who served as the fourth president of Ukraine from 2010 to 2014. He was removed from the presidency in the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, which followed months of protests against him. Since then, he has lived in exile in Russia.

is to establish horizontal ties with these countries, to engage in mutual communication, to present our story and what we are fighting for. Because we are not only fighting for ourselves – we are fighting for an international order based on international law, the one that was established after World War II. In doing so, we are preventing a third world war. And this is long-term work because the development of such horizontal, people-to-people contacts takes decades. Unfortunately, Ukraine did not invest in this after gaining independence, and now we are forced to build these bridges in a hurry.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the question of justice. How important is this issue for Ukrainian society? This war will end one day, but to what extent will the pursuit of justice shape the future of Ukraine and its people?

I will try to explain this by looking at several dimensions. We say that we want to achieve lasting peace. This means that something must happen within Ukrainian society, and something must happen within Russian society. Let me start with Ukrainian society. There was an interesting study in which a focus group was asked who they would like to hear an apology from: Putin, the Russian intelligentsia, the Russian army, the Russian parliament, or Russians as a nation? Or perhaps from someone specific? Interestingly, people in the focus group responded that they did not want an apology from anyone. People in Ukraine do not need apologies – they need something else. This means that if we fail to deliver justice through legal means, justice may be interpreted in many different ways, and this demand for justice could turn into a desire for revenge.

Let me now take on Russian society. This is not just Putin's war. Unfortunately, the majority of Russians either support this war or take the stance that the government knows best – if it started the war, then it must have been necessary. In general, Putin rules Russia not only through repression and censorship but also through a kind of social contract between the Russian people and the Kremlin's elites, based on the idea of so-called Russian greatness. This thoughtless evil has led to a situation where Russians still believe that their greatness lies in the forced restoration of the Russian Empire – and that this is normal. If a country is considered part of Russia's territory, then violating its borders, killing its people, and banning its language and culture are seen as normal in the 21st century.

If there is no justice, this way of thinking will persist.

But I would also like to show justice in two other dimensions. The first is the human dimension because I work with people who have been through hell, and I know for certain that they need to rebuild not only their broken families, vision of the future, lives and health but also their shattered belief that justice is possible – even if delayed. I have been documenting war crimes for 10 years. In the early years of the war, when people came to us, we asked survivors of captivity whether they had contacted international organisations or national law enforcement to tell their stories. Many survivors said no, arguing that these organisations could do nothing to the Russians in Russia or in the occupied territories, that they could not punish their tormentors. I then asked them why they had come to me. And people started to realise that deep down, they still had hope for justice – even if it was small, it was enough for them to agree to talk, to record their stories. If an opportunity for justice arises, they, too, want to be heard.

Many people see justice as something related to the past or the future – to the past because it holds people accountable for what has already been done, and to the future because it sends a signal that if you commit these acts, you will be punished. But justice is also about the present. Russians have never been punished for the crimes they committed, starting from the Soviet era – not for collectivisation, not for the Holodomor, not for Stalin's gulags, not for the forced deportation of entire nations. Never, for anything. If we take firm legal action now and at least make some Russians begin to doubt that they can get away with it this time, those doubts will create a chilling effect on brutal violations. When we talk about full-scale war, this means that we will be able to save thousands of lives.

Stefan Batory Foundation
Sapieżyńska 10a
00-215 Warsaw
tel. (48-22) 536 02 00
fax (48-22) 536 02 20
batory@batory.org.pl
www.batory.org.pl

War reveals the true resilience of states and their societies. Ukrainian society, together with public institutions, local authorities, and the military, has proven strong enough to withstand aggression from the Russian Federation – an adversary that is, at least nominally, far more powerful. One of the pillars of Ukraine's remarkable resilience is its proactive civil society, which not only rises in times of revolutionary upheaval but engages daily in matters of public importance: supporting the armed forces, caring for veterans and forcibly displaced persons, fighting corruption and overseeing government structures at both local and national levels, documenting war crimes committed by Russians, protecting cultural heritage, as well as fostering its development even under wartime conditions.

The collection *Resilience and Solidarity* consists of texts by Ukrainian experts and interviews with Ukrainian civil society activists. The publication seeks to describe and explain the mechanisms behind the functioning of Ukrainian civil society, which has proven remarkably adept at handling the most challenging of realities.

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