

The Frontier of Permanent Emergency

SECURITY UKRAINE

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Ukraine's resilience has not emerged from institutional strength or wartime unity, but from society's ability to adapt continuously to dysfunction, exhaustion, and permanent uncertainty.

Traveling to wartime Ukraine remains striking for one simple reason: the country continues to function deep into the fifth year of the war. Supplies and public services operate smoothly, especially in major urban centers. Construction continues, particularly in western Ukraine. Roads are still being repaired, however unevenly. Interestingly, some of the country's worst roads remain in the most western region of Zakarpattia rather than near the front. Yet, on the surface, daily life retains a surprising degree of normality.

The exhaustion appears more slowly. It emerges through longer conversations and extended stays: in the fatigue of local officials, the increasingly vocal and violent bitterness around mobilization, the visible poverty, and the widening gap between those fighting the war and those managing to live around it. The deeper contradiction of wartime Ukraine is its endurance. A system widely described as corrupt, fragmented, and institutionally weak has

nonetheless proven capable of sustaining one of the largest wars in modern Europe.

This contradiction challenges assumptions that have shaped much of Western thinking about resilience and state-building since the end of the Cold War.

The dominant view assumes a linear relationship between institutional quality and resilience. Stronger institutions produce stronger states; transparency generates legitimacy; centralized coherence improves crisis response.

Ukraine, at best, complicates this logic.

To understand Ukraine's resilience, the current moment must be placed within a longer trajectory that began with the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. That upheaval initiated a gradual reconfiguration of the relationship between society, elites, and the state. Decentralization transferred significant authority and resources to local communities. Anti-corruption institutions attempted to move parts of the system outside direct political control. Reform of the armed forces and the expansion of digital public services altered how citizens interacted with the state itself. These reforms remained uneven and incomplete, but they created layers of adaptive capacity that proved critical once the full-scale invasion began.

The country entered the war as what I earlier described as a "hybrid state": a system where formal institutions coexisted with informal networks, decentralised initiative, oligarchic influence, civic activism, and chronic improvisation. For years, these characteristics were largely interpreted as liabilities. Yet under the conditions of full-scale war, some became sources of adaptive capacity.

The most vivid examples often appear after Russian missile strikes. During repeated attacks on the energy grid, exhausted repair crews restored electricity and heating with a speed that regularly surprised foreign observers. In many cities, power returned because emergency workers, municipal authorities, private contractors, volunteers, and ordinary citizens continuously improvised around shortages. Those with electricity, heating, or hot water hosted those without. Over time, households adapted: batteries, generators, solar systems, local heating units, and in the worst cases even heated bricks became part of everyday survival. By 2025, households had added more than three gigawatts of decentralized renewable-energy capacity. Ukraine's infrastructure survived both because of the robustness of its Soviet-era energy system and through the constant human compensation.

Something similar occurred across the broader governance system after the conflict first erupted in 2014.

Volunteer networks formed during the early stages of the war in Donbas gradually became embedded in public life, often filling gaps the state itself struggled to fill. In many cases they supplied frontline units faster than formal procurement could react. Small technology teams and private workshops helped accelerate drone adaptation cycles that large bureaucracies struggled to match. Local governments organized evacuations, shelters, and emergency services often with limited central coordination. The state remained functional because enough actors continuously compensated for its weaknesses.

This adaptability could not have functioned without external support. Western military assistance prevented battlefield collapse. External financing sustained salaries, pensions, and basic state functions. European

protection regimes absorbed millions of displaced Ukrainians, reducing immediate social pressure inside the country while preserving long-term ties with Europe.

Western support did more than stabilize the state materially. The war accelerated Ukraine's psychological and political integration into the West long before any formal institutional integration could occur. For many Ukrainians, Europe ceased to represent an abstract geopolitical aspiration and became a lived social reality: a source of security, mobility, education, work, and recognition. The constant reaffirmation that Ukraine belonged politically and morally to a wider Western community became part of what held the country together.

Yet the same mechanisms that enabled resilience also deepened its contradictions. The costs of resilience have been enormous. Ukraine's population is now estimated at roughly 25 million. War-related losses – direct and indirect – number in the hundreds of thousands. These demographic pressures increasingly shape the country's political economy: constraining the labor market, shrinking the tax base, increasing welfare burdens, and influencing future electoral dynamics.

Wartime governance concentrated enormous power in the executive while expanding informal decision-making and emergency practices. Corruption persisted, but so did society's sensitivity toward it. In conversations across Ukraine, corruption is discussed not simply as a moral failure, but as a direct threat to survival. Evidence that sacrifice is not being shared equally.

The tensions around mobilization reveal these contradictions most clearly. Ukrainian society broadly accepts conscription as necessary for survival, but increasingly rejects the coercive and opaque methods associated with it. Over time, mobilization has also come to be seen as a burden falling disproportionately on poorer and less mobile segments of society, while wealthier Ukrainians are often perceived as better able to avoid frontline exposure through money, geography, or connections. The country's central divide is therefore increasingly one of experience: between those fighting, those living under constant danger, and those able to remain relatively insulated from both.

The sustainability of this equilibrium remains fragile. It can be undermined by two distinct but equally dangerous shocks. The first is military: a major battlefield defeat or further occupation that overwhelms society's capacity to absorb loss. The second is internal: the growing perception that the state itself may become a source of threat: through abusive mobilization practices or unchecked corruption.

And yet these tensions rarely translate into organized resistance against the wartime order. Under conditions of existential threat, many Ukrainians continue to perceive internal destabilization as directly benefiting Russia. Criticism accumulates, but confrontation remains limited. Social resilience is not a passive condition, but a constantly negotiated outcome. It depends on perceptions of fairness, credibility, and the belief that however flawed the state may be, the alternative remains far worse.

This may be the central lesson of Ukraine. **The country survived not because it overcame dysfunction, but because people learned to operate through it. The adaptation is continuous: driven by thousands of underpaid emergency workers, volunteers, local officials, soldiers, and repair crews compensating daily for institutional weakness.**

But this resilience also contains its own trap. Improvisation is highly effective during acute crisis, yet difficult to institutionalise. Informal networks can sustain survival under pressure while simultaneously weakening accountability and delaying normalisation. The longer the war continues, the harder it becomes to separate emergency adaptation from permanent governance.

Ukraine is emerging from the war as something difficult to categorise: a resilient but exhausted society held together by shared threat, external support, and continuous adaptation. The greater danger may no longer be collapse, but the normalisation of permanent emergency.

Ukraine remains an exceptional case. Few European societies would likely absorb comparable levels of violence, demographic loss, displacement, and institutional strain without fracturing politically. Yet millions of Ukrainians have effectively voted with their feet. Resilience has come at an enormous human cost.

The lesson for Europe is therefore not that dysfunction produces strength, or that Ukraine offers a model to replicate. It is that under prolonged geopolitical pressure, societies survive less through institutional perfection than through their capacity to adapt, improvise, and endure uncertainty for far longer than expected. The frontier may no longer be Europe's periphery. But Ukraine shows how heavy the burden of living on that frontier can become.

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