

How Ukraine Built Its Resilience

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The resilience that Ukraine is demonstrating against its many times larger aggressor is no coincidence. It is due not least to the great sacrifices of its people, but also to the fact that since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the country has deliberately and skilfully managed to strengthen both its military and its nation-building in the exact opposite direction from that desired by the Kremlin, writes Jakob Hedenskog, an analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS).

Russia's war against Ukraine has not gone according to the Kremlin's plan. The full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022 failed to bring about regime change in Kyiv. The main explanation is probably the shortcomings of its own warfare – intelligence failures, poor leadership, corruption, and poorly motivated soldiers with substandard equipment. Another reason is the unexpectedly high level of Western military aid to Ukraine.

A third explanation, somewhat understudied in the West, however, is the effective resilience of Ukraine. This ability to push back the Russian aggressor is no accident but can be largely attributed to deliberate reforms and changes made over the past eight years.

The 2022 resistance grew out of the humiliation of 2014. At the time of Russia's annexation of Crimea, Ukraine had virtually no military capability. When Russia also attacked the Donbas in the east, Ukraine's defence had to rely largely on the help of improvised volunteer units to contain the incursion. In addition, the new political leadership of the country, with Speaker Oleksandr Turchynov as acting president, had little legitimacy.

Over the next eight years, however, despite the ongoing low-level war in the Donbas, Ukraine managed to significantly strengthen its resilience. Institutional capacity and legitimacy were enhanced by the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, where both winners – Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelensky respectively – won the first round with over 50% of the vote. Local elections in October 2020 then renewed and strengthened the legitimacy of local assemblies and mayors. The recent decentralisation reform has also given the governing administrations in the regions a greater share of tax revenues, allowing the quality and availability of municipal services to the population to be increased.

Reforms Strengthened Defence

A series of reforms to strengthen Ukraine's defence capabilities has also been implemented. Funding for the military more than doubled between 2014 and 2021, and major organisational changes were made. The armed forces grew to 200,000 active personnel, at least one-third of whom have had experience of fighting in the Donbas. In 2016, special operations units were created as a separate military branch. In 2018, the counterterrorism operation in the Donbas, which had been launched in 2014 and was led by the Security Services, was transformed into a military operation led by the Joint Operational Staff of the armed forces. In 2020, a new post of Commander-in-Chief was created, to be appointed by the president, with command over all elements of the military and of the law enforcement authorities. All this has achieved better troop coordination.

In addition, the Law on the Foundations of National Resistance adopted in 2021 allowed the establishment of the *Teroborona*, or territorial defence forces, as a stand-alone branch of the armed forces with 10,000 personnel in peacetime but the capacity to mobilise 130,000. The law came into force as recently as 1 January 2022 and the first units were just being set up and trained as the Russian invasion began. In May 2022, parliament amended the law to expand both the size of the forces (from 25 to 32 brigades) and their powers.

Cooperation With NATO

In 2021, adaptation of Ukraine's armed forces to NATO standards accelerated in logistics, communications and the use and training of troops. Ukraine has made use of special NATO funds, or "trust funds", that member and partner countries can access for specific projects. Among other things, Ukraine was able to establish a secure communications system – something it lacked in 2014.

Cooperation with NATO has also aimed to reform the hierarchical structure of the military. In the past, there had been two main problems: a lack of good mid-level leaders in the officer corps and a top-heavy organisation. Initiative and responsibility had not been encouraged in the Soviet army, which meant that troops were waiting for direct orders from the top. This was the reason for the weak performance of Ukrainian troops in Crimea. In February 2022 Ukraine began development of a professional sergeant corps and to improve its operational interaction with NATO.

Ukraine also adopted a Military Security Strategy in 2021, the central goal of which was an "all-encompassing and in-advance-prepared defence of Ukraine", based on deterrence, resilience, and interaction. Resilience became a key theme in cooperation with NATO, including in the first joint exercise which took place in September 2021.

Another area where Ukraine's resilience has increased significantly is cyber. Having been continuously exposed to cyberattacks since 2015, including those aimed at knocking out parts of the electricity supply, Ukraine has substantially built up its cyber-defence capability with the help of domestic and foreign partner.

Strengthened Nation-Building

Perhaps the biggest change in Ukraine's resilience since 2014, however, is not about defence capabilities per se but about strengthened nation-building. The regional divide between the predominantly pro-European western and central regions and the predominantly pro-Russian south-eastern regions narrowed after the presidential elections of the 2004 Orange Revolution and effectively disappeared with the 2013–2014 Euromaidan Revolution. Of course, this consolidation was facilitated by the occupation of the most pro-Russian regions in 2014 and their inability to participate in the subsequent elections. However, the strengthening of Ukrainian identity and the increased use of the native language at the expense of Russian took place generally across the country.

According to opinion polls, the willingness of citizens to defend their country also increased up until and beyond the Russian invasion in February 2022. This willingness also came to include an underground resistance movement in the occupied regions. While not powerful enough to end the occupation per se, it makes the regions harder for Russia to govern and undermines Moscow's claim that the occupiers were welcomed by the local Ukrainian population.

Russia's war against Ukraine has shown how the societies of both countries have developed in diametrically opposite directions. While Russia's problems are largely due to the dictatorial political system and the authoritarian model of society, Ukrainian resilience can be attributed to individual initiative, pluralism, and decentralised decision making and action, as well as a feeling of knowing what one is fighting for. Any attempt to lump Russia and Ukraine together in some kind of common post-Soviet explanatory model was therefore always bound to fail.

Ukraine still has much to learn in terms of resilience. It will need continued Western support for the foreseeable future, both economically and militarily, in order to liberate the territories occupied by Russia and to counter future Russian aggression.

Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022 became a "crash test" for Ukrainian resilience. While not everything has worked perfectly, it has worked much better than in 2014, in large part because of the high level of commitment and sacrifice of the population.

Ukraine's transformation between 2014 and 2022 provides several lessons for the West: purposeful steps make it possible to strengthen a society's resilience even in the midst of war, it pays to resist, and no effort is too small. Voluntary organisations and community resilience, while already in place in 2014, were given new impetus and strengthened in 2022. Civil society volunteers play a crucial role through everything from large-scale fundraising to individual initiatives in everything from the procurement of weapons, uniforms, food, and bulletproof vests to the efforts of soldiers on the frontline.

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