Resilience as a ‘concept at work’ in the war in Ukraine: Exploring its international and domestic significance

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(Received 2 May 2023; revised 9 April 2024; accepted 10 April 2024)

Abstract

In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is striking that there have been many references to resilience, including by Western and Ukrainian leaders. This article is precisely about their use of resilience discourse, and it makes two important contributions to existing scholarship on resilience in conflict settings. First, drawing on Ish-Shalom’s idea of ‘concepts at work’ and analysing a selection of speeches and policy statements (by Western leaders and President Volodymyr Zelensky) that specifically refer to resilience, it demonstrates that resilience is a significant ‘concept at work’ in the war, making certain forms of international and domestic politics possible. Second, while research on resilience frequently discusses different ways that the concept has been defined and approached in fields such as engineering, ecology, and psychology, this article highlights that diverse framings of resilience have become entangled as the concept is ‘at work’ in the war in Ukraine. More specifically, its analysis makes prominent the fusion of different resilienties at different levels – from the individual to the systemic – discursively working together for particular political ends. In this way, it offers a novel way of thinking multi-systemically about resilience and, by extension, about resilience and complexity.

Keywords: concept at work; complexity; discourse analysis; multi-systemic approaches; neoliberalism; resilience; war in Ukraine

Introduction

The International Organization for Migration recently published an article that includes the photographs and abbreviated stories of Maksym, a doctor from Mariupol, and Oleksandra, an internally displaced woman from Bakhmut.1 Of particular note is the article’s title – ‘Faces of war: Portraits of Ukrainian grit, resilience two years on’. This resonates with a larger trend; many discussions about the war in Ukraine have repeatedly and consistently emphasised the theme of resilience. There are recurring references to it, for example, in media articles and reports on the conflict.2

1International Organization for Migration, ‘Faces of war: Portraits of Ukrainian grit, resilience two years on’ (2024), available at: [https://storyteller.iom.int/stories/faces-war-portraits-ukrainian-grit-resilience-two-years].

There have also been several studies seeking to measure and evaluate Ukrainians’ resilience. What has been particularly striking is the frequency with which Western and Ukrainian leaders have evoked resilience. This article is precisely about their use of resilience discourse.

Resilience has been described as ‘a notoriously slippery concept,’ and according to Simon and Randalls, its ‘definitive generality makes it amenable to do almost anything.’ This research, which draws on Ish-Shalom’s idea of ‘concepts at work,’ maintains that in the context of the war in Ukraine, resilience is doing several different things, internationally and domestically. It further underlines that extant scholarship – which is primarily concerned with analysing the concept’s conditions of possibility, empirically measuring it, and/or critiquing it – cannot sufficiently capture or explain what resilience is doing in the war. In developing these arguments, the article contributes to resilience research in two main ways.

First, repeatedly shifting between text and context, it analyses a selection of speeches and policy statements that specifically mention Ukrainian resilience and demonstrates that resilience is a ‘concept at work’ in making certain forms of international and domestic politics possible. It is important to note in this regard that, according to some scholars, resilience is imbricated with neoliberalism. What such critiques effectively highlight, therefore, is that resilience is a ‘concept at work’ in promoting a particular politics – one that foregrounds ‘individual responsibilisation and marketisation’. This research and its novel analysis, in contrast, suggest a broader politics of resilience. The article posits that recurring references to Ukrainian resilience by Western leaders, and the framing of the concept as an existing quality rather than as something that needs to be fostered, are helping to drive and sustain a policy (albeit one that is under increasing strain) of continued military support to Ukraine. This policy is linked, in turn, to wider security objectives. Focusing on some of President Volodymyr Zelensky’s own speeches, the article further argues that the concept of resilience is very much ‘at work’ in Ukraine. It is helping to boost public morale but also to strengthen the case for increased military support, thereby intermeshing with what resilience is doing at the international level.

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Second, research on resilience frequently highlights different ways that the concept has been defined and approached in fields such as engineering, ecology, and psychology. Presenting a genealogy of resilience, Bourbeau proposes that ‘understanding the multiple and multidisciplinary paths through which resilience has percolated into world politics is an essential first step to conducting an analysis of the application of resilience in international politics’. What this article demonstrates, however, is that diverse framings of resilience have become entangled as the concept is ‘at work’ in the war in Ukraine. More specifically, its analysis makes prominent the fusion of different resiliences at different levels – from the individual to the systemic – discursively working together for particular political ends. This is especially significant in the context of a growing emphasis within resilience research on the importance of multi-systemic approaches. Such approaches underline, *inter alia* how ‘ongoing multisystem interactions’ fundamentally shape and contour resilience. This article brings something new in this regard by exploring how intersecting resilience discourses reflect different systems and their cross-scale dynamics, which, as will be discussed, is also a different way of thinking about resilience and complexity.

**Contextualising this research within existing resilience scholarship**

**Scholarship on resilience and war**

The sheer volume of research on resilience, coupled with its cross-disciplinary nature, means that the concept has been defined in a variety of ways. As Cretney underlines, it is ‘a word with numerous meanings’. An important constant, however, is the idea of adaptive response to disturbance, and resilience can be broadly understood as ‘a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity’. War is a potent adversity in this regard; it is one of the major stressors that individuals (and the wider systems with which their lives are entangled, including families, communities, and ecosystems) can experience. Unsurprisingly, therefore, there are many studies of resilience in conflict and post-conflict settings. They variously explore ways of measuring resilience, people’s coping mechanisms and adaptive responses, and cultural and contextual factors shaping expressions and sources of resilience in conflict-affected environments.

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12Ann S. Masten, ‘Emergence and evolution of developmental resilience science over half a century’, *Development and Psychopathology* (2024), available at: [https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579424000154].


14Cretney, ‘Resilience for whom?’, p. 637.


19Elliana Barrios Suarez and Carla Suarez, ‘The memorialisation of narratives and sites among Indigenous women in Ayacucho: Resilience in the aftermath of mass violence and atrocities’, *Resilience*, 4:2 (2015), pp. 98–115; Maggie Zraly and
Some scholars have stressed that incorporating a resilience lens into conflict analyses can offer new insights into individuals’ war experiences, in particular the experiences of women.\(^{20}\) Other scholars, however, have expressed concerns about resilience-focused studies reaching very generalised conclusions about war-affected populations and neglecting intersectional identities. According to Keelan and Brown, for example, ‘findings from limited studies of Palestinian children and young males in Gaza have been applied uncritically to homogenise Palestinian resilience at large, reinforcing the problematic Western notion that Palestinians are a homogeneous group.’\(^{21}\) Moreover, characterisations of populations as ‘resilient’ may not resonate with local communities themselves.\(^{22}\)

Some of the most recent studies of resilience and war have focused specifically on Ukraine. Kurapov et al.’s research, for example, aims to assess the impact of the war on university students and personnel who have remained in the country,\(^ {23}\) and Oviedo et al. examine the resilience of Ukrainian refugees.\(^ {24}\) In another study, Giordano et al. identify and explore the principal protective factors, including close personal relationships and family support, that are helping Ukrainian youth to positively adapt to the conflict,\(^ {25}\) and Kokun’s work analyses key psychological resources that protect Ukrainians’ mental health from the impact of the war.\(^ {26}\) This article, although similarly focused on the war in Ukraine, is distinctive from existing studies on the conflict – and also from scholarship on resilience and war more broadly.

**Resilience as a ‘concept at work’ in the war in Ukraine**

Resilience has been a recurring and prominent theme in many discussions – and in particular policy discussions – about the war in Ukraine, and this is the wider context in which the idea for this article took shape. Rather than adopt an ontological approach to resilience in the sense of looking for evidence of it, this research is concerned with the important question of what resilience is *doing* in the war politically, both internationally and domestically. Significant in this regard is the aforementioned notion of ‘concepts of work’, which Ish-Shalom links to the issue of meaningfulness. According to him, concepts are meaningful in two ways: (1) as expressively mental representations of phenomena and (2) because of their social and, no less importantly, political significance and function.\(^ {27}\) This article frames resilience as a ‘concept at work’ in the war in Ukraine and uses Ish-Shalom’s reflections on the meaningfulness of concepts – and in particular his argument that ‘an expressively mental representation of a phenomenon can serve as a roadmap for political action’\(^ {28}\) – as a useful starting point for thinking about the ‘work’ that resilience is doing in the conflict.


Kurapov et al., ‘Toward an understanding of the Russian–Ukrainian war impact on university students and personnel.’


Giordano et al., ‘Resilience processes among Ukrainian youth.’

Oleg Kokun, ‘The stability of mental health during war: Survey data from Ukraine,’ *Journal of Loss and Trauma* (2024), available at: [https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2024.2328649].


A common critique of resilience – and one that is especially relevant to this article given its policy focus – is that its practical implementation is deeply entangled with neoliberalism. As Bowles asserts, ‘the resilient individual is a neoliberal individual … obligated to adapt to a harsh environment of failures and threats.’ Although such arguments were first articulated more than a decade ago and have been widely criticised, they remain significant in resilience research, as Smirnova et al.’s bibliometric analysis illustrates. They are also relevant to thinking about resilience in terms of what it does; they demonstrate how it is ‘at work’ in fostering a particular political agenda.

What they offer, thus, is an expressively mental representation of resilience as something that needs to be externally fostered and enabled. Jaspars, for example, points to a critical shift in aid practices from earlier efforts aimed at saving lives to, more recently, policies that seek to promote resilience among local communities and populations. Focused on the UK’s approach to resilience, Chmutina et al.’s work accentuates the ‘implementation of resilience’, linked to a process that is both heavily centralised and ‘dominated by prescriptive policies’; and Bargués-Pedreny reflects, more broadly, on ‘interventions to enhance resilience’ – and on ‘deficit’ framings of resilience as something that is always lacking and has no defined end state. In other words, there is a strong correlation between what Ish-Shalom terms ‘the conceptions of concepts’ – in this case resilience – and actions.

Arguments about resilience and neoliberalism, however, are of limited use in explaining the repeated policy references to resilience in the context of the war in Ukraine. What this article’s discourse analysis demonstrates is that the concept is ‘at work’ in far more complex and multilayered ways. The first point to highlight is that when Western and Ukrainian leaders invoke resilience, it is represented not as something that needs to be actively encouraged and stimulated but as an existing quality among Ukrainians. Resilience is also frequently accentuated alongside concepts such as bravery and courage, and part of this article’s analysis involves unpacking what this conceptual entanglement is ‘doing’ both internationally and domestically. Joseph and Juncos have explored the political functions of resilience within the European Union (EU), framing it as a ‘concept at work’ that was primarily ‘trying to hide differences between member states and different EU interests’. Something similar is arguably happening in Ukraine. More specifically, what we are seeing discursively is resilience ‘at work’ with other concepts in creating and sustaining a strong narrative around the need for continued military support for the country, which is helping, in turn, to deflect from some of the deeper policy differences between Western countries with respect to the war.

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President Zelensky’s own frequent use of resilience discourse further contributes to this narrative and also does important work domestically, boosting morale and keeping people united behind the war effort – and his leadership.

The second crucial point to underline is that in the context of the war in Ukraine, resilience is not just ‘at work’ with other concepts. There are also different resiliences at work. Significant in this regard are some of the discussions within extant scholarship accentuating the ‘ontological multiplicity of resilience’. In his article entitled ‘What kind of thing is resilience?’, for example, Anderson emphasises that ‘no one policy or programme or articulation can exemplify “resilience” and claims about resilience in the singular and in general miss the particular consequences and implications of this or that variety of resilience.’ For their part, Simon and Randalls underline the importance of ‘thinking through what resilience multiple does or can do’. This article’s analysis demonstrates ‘the practice of resilience multiple’ in the war in Ukraine, unpacking how different conceptualisations of resilience – in particular psychological and systemic – are ‘hanging’ and working together.

The third and related point is that these different resiliences are working together at different levels, which, in turn, highlights the important issue of complexity. Complex systems consist of multiple subsystems nesting within larger subsystems. Cross-scale interactions and dynamics are thus an integral part of these systems and how they behave. Research on resilience and complexity has challenged the ‘hierarchical causal structure and assumptions of socially determined interactive outcomes’ associated with neoliberalism – and in so doing it has accentuated local capacities and resources. Relatedly, there has been a recent growth of multi-systemic research on resilience. Scholars are increasingly interested in how multiple systems at different scales, and the interactions and dynamics between these systems, shape resilience. As Ungar articulates, ‘the science of resilience requires that multiple systems (and scales of systems) are accounted for as no single variable can be wholly responsible for the complexity of the processes associated with resilience and the outcomes that result.’ This article speaks directly to such arguments. By demonstrating that

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42 Simon and Randalls, ‘Geography, ontological politics and the resilient future’, p. 5.
44 According to Folke, ‘Theories of complex systems portray systems not as deterministic, predictable and mechanistic, but as process-dependent organic ones with feedbacks among multiple scales that allow these systems to self-organize.’ Carl Folke, ‘Resilience: The emergence of a perspective for social–ecological systems analyses’, Global Environmental Change, 16 (2006), pp. 253–67 (p. 257).
recurring references to Ukrainian resilience – as an (assumed) local quality – have shaped international and domestic policies relating to the ongoing war in the country, it also thus foregrounds interactions between different systems. This illustrates, more broadly, that ‘the international system in which we sit can be usefully described as complex’. Additionally, the article makes its own contribution to multi-systemic approaches to resilience by emphasising how different conceptualisations of resilience, reflective of different systems and scales, are working together in the war in Ukraine. This has ‘implications for a more integrated [resilience] science’ but also for complexity itself. In short, complexity is not just about cross-scale interactions but also about cross-scale ontologies of resilience, and this is another dimension of ‘resilience multiple’.

Method

Within IR, there is extensive discussion about and engagement with discourse analysis (DA). What also stands out is the diverseness of IR’s ‘encounters’ with, and approaches to thinking about/doing, DA. Hence, this type of analysis can be described as encompassing ‘a highly varied collection of conceptual frameworks and analytical lenses’. Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams, for example, discuss the significance of new materialism for thinking about DA, underlining in this regard the ‘inseparability of language and matter’. Aleandro has developed an approach that she calls reflexive discourse analysis. According to her, DA is a way of implementing reflexivity, and she directly encourages researchers ‘to conceive themselves as social agents engaged in the world via their discursive activity’. MacKenzie, for her part, adopts a visual approach to DA, exploring soldier-produced illicit images as ‘a visual vernacular’ that can provide important insights into internal military culture. Some of the studies of resilience that use DA similarly reflect a diversity of approaches.

This article, to be clear, does not offer a novel approach to DA or break new ground methodologically. Proceeding from the starting point that ‘the rise and fall of discourses helps to shape


51 In their own research, in contrast, Tschakert et al. highlight ‘mismatches of scales, such as local empowerment processes competing with project-driven governmentality’; these occur ‘when what is deemed as being resilient at a particular scale creates exclusions at the same or another scale’. Petra Tschakert, Meg Parsons, Ed Atkins, et al., ‘Methodological lessons for negotiating power, political capabilities, and resilience in research on climate change responses’, World Development, 167 (2023), p. 106247.


the parameters of what is politically possible\textsuperscript{62} – an illustrative example of which is Hansen’s post-structuralist analysis of discourse relating to the 1992–5 Bosnian war\textsuperscript{63} – the article’s aim is to demonstrate the importance of DA in helping to elucidate resilience as a ‘concept at work’ in the war in Ukraine. It broadly understands DA as ‘a careful, close reading that moves between text and context to examine the content, organization and functions of discourse’\textsuperscript{64} It also accentuates intertextuality, a key concept in DA.\textsuperscript{65} According to Fairclough, ‘intertextual analysis has an important mediating role in linking text to context’.\textsuperscript{66} In this research, intertextuality is especially useful in illuminating commonalities in how Western leaders invoke and discuss resilience, linked to the article’s argument that the concept is ‘at work’ in helping to overcome (or paper over) Western divisions relating to the war in Ukraine.

It is important to emphasise that doing DA in the context of a ‘live’ and active conflict presents challenges. The first challenge is that, contrary to Alejandro’s argument that discourse ‘is empirically assessable material’,\textsuperscript{67} not all discourses are empirically accessible in war settings, for political and security reasons. It would be extremely interesting to undertake a DA of public and ‘hidden’ transcripts relating to the war in Ukraine. According to Scott, ‘the hidden transcript is ... derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript’.\textsuperscript{68} Hidden transcripts can also expose the full range of ‘discursive nodal points’\textsuperscript{69} in policy discussions about the war in Ukraine. This article’s analysis, however, is necessarily confined to publicly available materials and transcripts.

The second challenge relates to the fact that it was not possible to identify a priori a defined number of texts to analyse. Similarly, the ongoing nature of the conflict also limited the scope for decisions about what Hansen terms ‘the choice of Selves – or how many states, nations, or other foreign policy subjects one wishes to examine’.\textsuperscript{70} This article, thus, has had to take the more open approach of actively searching, throughout the writing process, for relevant policy statements and speeches about the war in Ukraine. Because it is tracing a ‘concept at work’, it has selected on the dependent variable, focusing on a selection of international and Ukrainian statements and speeches about the war that specifically refer to resilience.

In total, the article has analysed more than 40 statements and speeches. For its interpretative analysis of what resilience is ‘doing’ domestically, it has used a selection of President Zelensky’s speeches, relying on the English translations (the author is not a Ukrainian speaker). These English translations, however, were taken from official sources, notably the website of the President of Ukraine, and some of the speeches analysed are published in English in Zelensky’s book \textit{A Message from Ukraine}.\textsuperscript{71}

\bibitem{Alejandro1990} Alejandro, ‘Reflexive discourse analysis’, p. 153.
\bibitem{Hansen2006} Lene Hansen, \textit{Security as Practice}, p. 67. Emphasis in the original.
The discourse of ‘Ukrainian resilience’ and its significance at the international level

On 24 February 2022, Russian forces unlawfully invaded the sovereign state of Ukraine from several directions (although acts of aggression by the Russian military against Ukraine’s territorial integrity commenced eight years earlier, as highlighted by the illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and Russia’s involvement in the Donbas conflict that began in April 2014). This so-called special military operation was supposed to be over within a few days; President Vladimir Putin ‘was expecting a quick and decisive victory that would cement his place in Russian history.’

More than two years on, however, there is no end to the conflict in sight. Intense fighting continues along the front lines, with both sides making very limited gains, and some Western leaders – including NATO’s secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, and the UK prime minister Rishi Sunak – have underlined the need to be prepared for a ‘long war.’

From the outset, the war in Ukraine has exposed flaws within the Russian military and its command structure, as well as critical operational failures and shortcomings. The reliance on mercenaries, like the late Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Wagner Group – which played a crucial part in the fighting in the eastern city of Bakhmut – is itself an important indicator of these weaknesses. The Kremlin, moreover, had not counted on the fierce resistance mounted by both the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian people, further derailing expectations of a swift and decisive victory. Indeed, both within and beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, ‘few imagined that Ukrainian forces could hold out for very long against the Russian steamroller.’

Against this backdrop, reports and commentary about the war have frequently highlighted Ukraine’s resilience. The Financial Times newspaper, for example, has described President Volodymyr Zelensky – whom it named as ‘Person of the Year’ in 2022 – as embodying ‘the courage and resilience of the Ukrainian people in their fight against Russian aggression.’ UN Women has paid tribute ‘to the exceptional dignity, resilience, leadership and courage of Ukrainian women and girls who continue to pay an enormous price for this severe violation of international human rights and humanitarian law.’ For his part, Manfred Profazi, the regional director of the International Organization for Migration, has noted that during a visit to Ukraine in March 2023, he was ‘lucky enough to be able to hear first-person accounts of survival, of resilience, and even optimism from young and old alike.’

It is important to note that discussions about resilience in and with respect to Ukraine pre-date the February 2022 invasion and resultant full-scale war. In 2015, for instance, the EU adopted the revised European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), one of the aims of which is to support resilience in Eastern Partnership countries, including Ukraine. Lavrelashvili points out in this regard that the...
ENP ‘was one of the first documents to introduce resilience-building as a foreign-policy goal’.80 Five years later, the European Commission released a document, linked to the larger Eastern Partnership, entitled ‘Reinforcing resilience – An Eastern Partnership that delivers for all’.81 Such policies themselves can be viewed as examples of resilience ‘at work’,82 illustrating how the concept is ‘mobilised politically by specific actors for specific functions in specific contexts’.83 This reinforces, in turn, the importance and novelty of analysing what resilience is doing politically in the particular context of the war in Ukraine. This section focuses on what it is doing at the international level and explores how Western leaders have discursively used the concept to help mobilise and sustain military support for Ukraine, linked to wider security objectives.

**Resilience and continued support for Ukraine**

In relation to the war in Ukraine, resilience has been invoked in a variety of ways. There have been references, inter alia, to the country’s resilience in dealing with repeated Russian attacks on its energy infrastructure,84 and to the resilience of its economy85 and primary health-care system.86 It is also striking, however, that international discourse on the war strongly accentuates the resilience of the Ukrainian people, framing resilience as a psychological concept linked to qualities such as bravery.

Speaking just a few days after Russian forces invaded the country, for example, Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, insisted that ‘President Zelensky’s leadership and his bravery and the resilience of the Ukrainian people are outstanding and impressive’.87 In a statement in June 2022, US president Joe Biden remarked on the ‘bravery, resilience, and determination of the Ukrainian people’,88 and in August 2023, the chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Bob Menendez, asserted that ‘the Ukrainian people have given new meaning to the words bravery and resilience’.89 In a similar vein, Rishi Sunak, the UK prime

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81 European Commission, ‘Joint communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020’, p. 4.

82 According to Nitoiu and Simionov, for example, ‘by offering a series of tools and templates for states in the neighbourhood to deal with geopolitical risks and challenges (and hence to enhance their resilience) the EU is externalising its failure, without really developing or implementing new policy ideas and practices’. Cristian Nitoiu and Loredana Simionov, ‘A new business as usual? The impact of the “resilience turn” on the EU’s foreign policy and approach towards the eastern neighbourhood’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 31:4 (2023), pp. 1073–85 (p. 1078).


minister, underscored during a speech in February 2023 that ‘as we approach the anniversary of Russia’s barbaric and deplorable invasion of Ukraine, as a nation we pay tribute to the incredible bravery and resilience of the Ukrainian people.’

On one hand, the frequent contiguous positioning of these concepts – an example of intertextuality – is reductionist, diluting the richness and complexity of resilience. Additionally, words like ‘incredible bravery’ detract from the quintessential ‘ordinariness’ of resilience – and from some of the myriad everyday ways that ordinary people may express it. People like Julia Hermanovska, a 79-year-old widow with stage four cancer living in Kyiv. Describing her passion for picking mushrooms, she explained: ‘When my husband died, I took a year to “resurrect”, so to say. But then I got cancer. And since then, I haven’t gone mushroom picking.’ She continued: ‘I dream of them. When I can’t fall asleep, I picture those meadows, those moments when I found mushrooms.’ The key point is that for people living through war and armed conflict, resilience is often a necessity, in the sense that they have to get on with life as best they can and, in the words of the Ukrainian politician Lesiya Vasyleenko, find a new ‘normal’ in the abnormal. What is significant is how they do so and what they use (material resources, relationships, memories, dreams) to help them in this regard.

On the other hand, repeated references to Ukraine’s resilience and bravery have an important political function and utility, even more so the longer the war continues. Western powers have provided Ukraine with indispensable military support since the conflict began. In March 2023, for example, Poland and Slovakia agreed to send MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine; Germany revealed plans in November 2023 to increase its military aid to Ukraine from €4 billion to €8 billion; and the following month, the USA announced an additional military assistance package (its 54th drawdown package) worth $250 million – including air defence system components and medical equipment – to aid Ukraine in meeting its urgent security needs. For its part, the UK has announced that it will provide Ukraine with a £2.5 billion military aid package over the next year, and France has signed a security pact with Ukraine that includes a pledge for up to €3 billion in additional military aid in 2024.

However, some significant divisions have also emerged. Germany’s hesitance – which it subsequently overcame – to send Leopard tanks to Ukraine provoked considerable frustration in some quarters, including the Baltic states and Poland. More recently, Chancellor Olaf Scholz has called on EU member states to do more to aid Ukraine, insisting that ‘the planned weapons spending-tilt-tenable’.


93Gideon Rachman, ‘Ukraine series: Life in a war zone’ (9 February 2023), available at: [https://www.ft.com/content/920c868b-5ccd-4196-9b1e-d6f2ae2c488b].

94Raphael Minder, Felicia Schwartz, Polina Ivanova, and Ben Hall, ‘Slovakia joins Poland in sending Soviet-era jets to Ukraine’ (17 March 2023), available at: [https://www.ft.com/content/4be57777-9a3a-4b00-837a-91077d0f4e5b].


deliveries to Ukraine of most EU member states are not enough\textsuperscript{109} but he is also facing pressure from Western allies on the issue of providing Ukraine with long-range Taurus missiles.\textsuperscript{101} Elsewhere in the EU, Slovakia’s former populist prime minister, Robert Fico, returned to power in October 2023 pledging to halt all further military aid to Ukraine,\textsuperscript{102} although he delivered a very different message during his first trip to Kyiv in January 2024.\textsuperscript{103} There are other disagreements too. For example, while Nordic and eastern European states adhere to the view that the Russian Federation must be militarily and decisively defeated in Ukraine, France, Germany, and southern European states have sought to avoid escalation in the belief that a Putin cornered and in decline could lead to uncontrollable developments.\textsuperscript{104} President Emmanuel Macron, for instance, has insisted that Russia should be defeated but not crushed.\textsuperscript{105} However, he has also refused to rule out the possibility of sending ground troops to Ukraine, maintaining that nothing should be excluded.\textsuperscript{106} This stance has contributed to further fuelling divides among NATO countries.\textsuperscript{107}

It is against this political backdrop that we can think about resilience as a ‘concept at work’ in the war and probe what it is doing (its ‘meaningfulness’, to use Ish-Shalom’s term).\textsuperscript{108} The first point to underline in this regard is that the concept is being put to work, in part, in an affective sense. Specifically, a recurring thematic within international policy discourse on the war in Ukraine – and one that offers an interesting variation on studies exploring the relationship between resilience and positive emotions\textsuperscript{109} – is that Ukrainians’ resilience and bravery/courage engage and evoke emotions. As one illustration, the UK ambassador Neil Bush has emphasised that ‘our support for Ukraine – a free, sovereign and democratic Ukraine – remains steadfast as ever. Our admiration of the incredible courage and resilience of the Ukrainian people grows daily.’\textsuperscript{109} In a similar vein, the Dutch ambassador to Ukraine, Jenness de Mol, has expressed that ‘I’ve come to deeply admire the resilience of the Ukrainians. I feel truly invested in these people and what happens to them.’\textsuperscript{110}


The field of International Relations (IR) has traditionally given little attention to emotions.\textsuperscript{112} This, however, is starting to change, and it is instructive to think about the war in Ukraine and the repeated use of resilience discourse in relation to a wider ‘emotional turn in IR’.\textsuperscript{113} The argument being made here is that by being put to work emotionally, resilience is also doing something important strategically, by shifting the focus from disagreements within the NATO alliance and EU and making prominent positive affective responses (admiration, inspiration) that both reinforce the necessity of that support and create a basis for forging solidarity. This emotional-strategic interplay is especially salient when references to Ukrainian resilience and courage, and the emotions they stir, are placed directly alongside the themes of Western support and unity. For example, the US secretary of state, Anthony Blinken – according to whom support for Ukraine within NATO ‘remains rock solid’\textsuperscript{114} – has declared that ‘Ukraine’s resilience, courage, and determination have inspired the world and galvanized U.S. and global efforts to help it defend itself and secure its future.’ In a particularly illustrative statement (to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE]), the UK’s military adviser, Ian Stubbs, remarked that:

Ukraine has regained territory and liberated thousands of Ukrainian people thanks to the awe-inspiring bravery of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the resilience of the Ukrainian people and the overwhelming international support. Together, the UK and partners are ensuring that Ukraine will win. Our united approach of providing Ukraine with the support it needs to defend itself and push Russia out of Ukraine’s sovereign territory is the swiftest, and only, path to a just and lasting peace.\textsuperscript{116}

The second and related point to highlight is that while some resilience scholars increasingly deemphasise personal and psychological traits,\textsuperscript{117} international policy discourse relating to the war in Ukraine frequently accentuates them. This is important, in turn, because it demonstrates how imputed individual (and national) characteristics function in a larger international context, as an illustration of complexity, and brings together psychological and systemic framings of resilience in a novel way. In effect, what we are seeing in the war in Ukraine is the use of a heavily psychological discourse that has a wider macro-systemic relevance and significance – as the remainder of this section discusses – and lends empirical weight to Ungar’s argument that ‘the resilience of one system [is] potentially a catalyst for the resilience of other cooccurring systems.’\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{114}US Department of State, ‘Secretary Anthony J. Blinken and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba before their meeting’ (4 April 2024), available at: \{https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-ukrainian-foreign-minister-dmytro-kuleba-before-their-meeting-10/\}.
\textsuperscript{115}US Department of State, ‘Secretary Anthony J. Blinken and Dmytro Kuleba’ (21 September 2023), available at: \{https://www.state.gov/additional-u-s-security-assistance-for-ukraine-10/\}.
\textsuperscript{117}According to Masten, for example, ‘many personality traits may play a role in resilience but there is little evidence that there is a singular trait of resilience. Worse, the idea of a resilience trait inevitably suggests that individuals who fumble are deficient, when it is far more likely that many systems external to the individual have “failed” to provide sufficient support or protection.’ Masten, ‘Resilience in developing systems,’ pp. 305–6. See also Michael Ungar, ‘Resilience across cultures,’ \textit{British Journal of Social Work}, 38:2 (2008), pp. 218–35 (pp. 220–1); Adrian D. Van Breda, ‘Journey towards independent living: A grounded theory investigation of leaving the care of Girls & Boys Town, South Africa,’ \textit{Journal of Youth Studies}, 18:3 (2020), pp. 322–37 (p. 325).
References to resilience help to reinforce and promote the narrative – which is also integral to sustaining political unity among Western allies – that supporting Ukraine is about something much bigger than just Ukraine. Apposite in this regard is Coaffee and Fussey's concept of “security-driven resilience” to capture multi-directional processes in which resilience policy becomes increasingly driven by security concerns and, at the same time, security policy adopts the language of resilience. Thinking about this in relation to the war in Ukraine, this article submits that the use of resilience discourse is driven by deeper concerns about international security and the stability of the international order.

Stability is a salient theme in resilience research, particularly in studies that analyse the resilience of interlinked social-ecological systems (SES). These systems – which reflect and accent the ‘integrated concept of humans-in-nature’ and are frequently associated with complexity – are not static and unchanging. Resilience, as Walker et al. define it, is about systems’ capacity ‘to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks – in other words, stay in the same basin of attraction’. If these systems move into an entirely different basin of attraction, however, something much more radical occurs, namely a transformation that entails ‘fundamentally altering the nature of a system’.

Applying this to Ukraine, the pivotal point is that the war constitutes a major shock to the international system, exposing its vulnerabilities – including with respect to food and energy security – and challenging its stability. In the language of SES theory, the war has contributed to moving the international system ever closer to the edge of its current basin of attraction and to critical ‘tipping points’. Building resilience within the multiple subsystems that comprise it is therefore a necessity and a priority. The security of the liberal international order – which some would argue was already in crisis long before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – is dependent on the ability of these systems to respond and adapt to multiple threats and stressors.

In a joint press conference with Ursula von der Leyen, for example, NATO’s secretary general spotlighted the ‘bravery of Ukrainian forces’, which, he argued, ‘also shows how vital it is that we step up our support, our military support to Ukraine’. He further stressed, commenting on an agreement between the EU and NATO to set up a taskforce on resilience and critical infrastructure protection, the imperative of making ‘our critical infrastructure, technology and supply chains more resilient to potential threats and to take action to mitigate potential vulnerabilities’. According to him, ‘this will be an important step in making our societies safer and stronger’.

References

124 Walker et al., ‘Resilience, adaptability and transformability in social–ecological systems’.
127 NATO, ‘Press statement by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg together with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen ahead of the meeting at the College of European Commissioners’ (11 January 2023), available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_210614.htm].
to the UN Security Council, the UK’s deputy permanent representative to the UN, Ambassador James Kariuki, underlined that ‘Ukraine’s resilience and the support of its international partners will remain strong’. He also remarked on the ‘staggering’ cost of the war to global food supplies and insisted on the need for action ‘to tackle the causes of food insecurity and malnutrition and unlock our diverse resources for a more resilient, food-secure future’. More recently, in a speech to the Kyiv Security Forum, the chair of the NATO Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer, variously referred to Ukrainians’ strength, courage, bravery, and resilience and maintained that NATO and Ukraine have never been closer. He continued: ‘With every day that passes, we become closer. More interoperable. More intertwined ... Why? Because we all believe in the power of democracy. That is what is at stake here.’

What this section has demonstrated, thus, is that resilience is a ‘concept at work’ at different levels, moving and shifting between them and fusing together different resistances. Ultimately, it is helping to foster a sense of common purpose among Western powers, by reinforcing and reiterating what is actually at stake and, by extension, aiding a larger political and security agenda aimed at safeguarding and protecting the resilience of the liberal international order. As Way argues, ‘more than sixty years after the horrors of World War II inspired the creation of the European Union, the invasion has again reminded the world of the brutal human cost brought about by the rejection of liberal values.

To some extent, therefore, resilience is ‘at work’ in the war in Ukraine in a way that lends support to previously mentioned critiques of resilience as a neoliberal form of governmentality. Yet it also illuminates the narrowness of these critiques. What the war makes salient is that resilience and associated resistibilisation discourses ‘are not always, or indeed, inherently, individualistic’, even when they strongly accentuate psychological and personal traits. They also work upwards (to the international level) and outwards (to multiple actors) – an interesting example in a political context of cross-scale effects and interactions associated with complex SES.

The discourse of ‘Ukrainian resilience’ within President Zelensky’s speeches

This section explores the frequent use of resilience discourse within Ukraine itself and focuses on President Zelensky’s speeches. Its analysis demonstrates that, once again, resilience is ‘at work’ in more than one way. Fundamentally, when Zelensky invokes resilience, the concept is doing important work not just domestically but also internationally.

Resilience discourse as a morale booster

There are various examples, from very different contexts, of resilience discourse being utilised (and instrumentalised) in ways that contribute to supporting and uplifting popular morale during periods of significant turbulence and uncertainty, and President Zelensky himself frequently uses...
this discourse. In some cases, he approaches resilience from a normative angle. On 4 December 2022, he insisted – as Russian forces intensified their attacks on the country’s infrastructure in a bid to weaken or break Ukrainian morale\textsuperscript{135} – that ‘we have to do everything to endure this winter, no matter how hard it is … To get through the winter, we have to be even more resilient and even more united than ever.’\textsuperscript{136} Relatedly, in an earlier address to the Ukrainian people on 3 April 2022, he stressed that ‘no matter whether we are in a security alliance or stand alone, we understand one thing: we must be strong.’\textsuperscript{137} Recently, in a speech to Ukrainians on 18 February 2024, he declared that ‘we must continue to be resilient, we must continue to be determined. We must achieve our Ukrainian goals in this war.’\textsuperscript{138}

More commonly, he comments on and celebrates Ukrainian resilience. As fighting raged in Bakhmut in 2023, he paid ‘special tribute to the bravery, strength and resilience of the soldiers fighting in the Donbas.’\textsuperscript{139} During intense battles for the city of Avdiivka, which fell to Russian forces in February 2024, he praised the resilience of Ukrainian forces – describing it as ‘the strength of all Ukraine’\textsuperscript{140} – and insisted that ‘we are holding our ground. It is Ukrainian courage and unity that will determine how this war will end.’\textsuperscript{141} On the first anniversary of Russia’s invasion, he emphasised that ‘it was a year of resilience. A year of care. A year of bravery. A year of pain. A year of hope. A year of endurance. A year of unity.’\textsuperscript{142} In November 2023, on the first anniversary of the liberation of Kherson – which he described as ‘the city of hope’ – he stressed that ‘Ukraine always returns – always! When we know our goal. When it’s a shared goal. When we are united.’\textsuperscript{143}

As these examples show, Zelensky’s repeated references to resilience and other qualities that he associates with being Ukrainian – notably strength, bravery, and courage – frequently accentuate the need for unity at home. In this way, he draws attention to the relational dynamics of resilience, as something that requires everyone working and pulling together for the greater good. In his words, ‘if we preserve our resilience, we will end the war sooner.’\textsuperscript{144} The recurring themes of resilience and unity illuminate, in turn, the ‘solidarity frame’ that Nisch’s research discusses. Based on an analysis of 613 tweets by the Ukrainian president between 24 February 2022 and 24 February 2023, he

\textsuperscript{135} James Horncastle, ‘Russia is using drones to target Ukrainian electricity and erode morale’ (16 January 2023), available at: \url{https://theconversation.com/russia-is-using-drones-to-target-ukrainian-electricity-and-erode-morale-197565}.

\textsuperscript{136} President of Ukraine, ‘To get through the winter, we have to be even more resilient and even more united: Address by the President of Ukraine’ (4 December 2022), available at: \url{https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/shob-projti-zimu-mi-mayemo-butij-she-bilsh-stijkimi-i-she-bil-79633}.

\textsuperscript{137} Zelensky, \textit{A Message from Ukraine}, p. 93.

\textsuperscript{138} President of Ukraine, ‘We must continue to be resilient, determined and achieve Ukrainian goals in this war: Address by President Volodymyr Zelensky’ (18 February 2024), available at: \url{https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/musimo-buti-j-nadali-stijkimi-rishuchimi-j-dosyagti-ukrayins-89089}.

\textsuperscript{139} Lucy Skoulding, ‘Ukraine vows to defend “fortress” Bakhmut as Russia claims battle is “close to end”’ (6 March 2023), available at: \url{https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-vows-defend-bakhmut-in-battle-b2294621.html}.

\textsuperscript{140} Francesca Ebel and Serhii Korolchuk, ‘Russia and Ukraine intensify fight over Avdiivka, another ruined city’ (28 October 2023), available at: \url{https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/28/avdiivka-russia-ukraine-war-donetsk/}.

\textsuperscript{141} BBC, ‘Ukraine war: Russia attacks Avdiivka stronghold in eastern Ukraine’ (12 October 2023), available at: \url{https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-67095103}.


\textsuperscript{145} President of Ukraine, ‘Volodymyr Zelensky: If we preserve our resilience, our morale, we will end the war sooner’ (19 December 2023), available at: \url{https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-yaksho-mi-ne-vтратimo-nashoyi-stiskosti-87853}.
argues that Zelensky uses this solidarity frame to ‘show how his people stand together during this difficult time’.145

Linked to his use of resilience discourse, Zelensky has often described Ukraine and its people as unbreakable. In his aforementioned speech on the first anniversary of the war, for example, he referred to cities such as Mariupol, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, and Kherson as ‘hero cities’ and ‘capitals of invincibility’.146 In his New Year Address on 31 December 2023, he stressed that ‘no matter how many missiles the enemy fires, no matter how many shellings and attacks ... the enemy carries out in an attempt to break Ukrainians, intimidate them, knock them down, drive them underground, we will still rise.’147 Speaking at Hostomel airport on the second anniversary of the war, and emphasising ‘730 days of resilience and endurance’, President Zelensky asserted that ‘we will succeed. And here, in this place, you understand best – metal may not withstand, but Ukrainians do. You can destroy the plane, but you cannot destroy the dream.’148

Interestingly, this accent on Ukraine's indomitability has not been confined to the discursive level. So-called invincibility centres (also known as ‘Points of Invincibility’) were first set up in November 2022, in places such as administrative buildings and shopping centres, and have provided Ukrainians with hot meals and opportunities to warm themselves, charge their phones, and so on.149 The country’s prime minister, Denys Shmyhal, has described these invincibility centres as ‘islands of Ukrainian resilience.’150 In other words, the centres can be seen as a physical extension of the discursive relationship between resilience and invincibility, evidencing how these two concepts are ‘at work’ together in more than one way.

Domestically, frequent references to resilience and related concepts have an important political function. War fatigue in the country is increasing151 – in part due to the limited gains that have been made during Ukraine's much anticipated counter-offensive – and Ukrainian soldiers are understandably exhausted.152 According to surveys conducted by Gallup in July and August 2023, however, 60 per cent of Ukrainians still want the country to continue fighting until it wins.153 The data further revealed that ‘President Volodymyr Zelensky is a key figure in national support for the war. His personal approval ratings remain sky-high in 2023 (81%).’154 Relatively, a poll conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in early December 2023 revealed that Zelensky is the most trusted Ukrainian politician (although the trust indicator decreased to 77 per cent from 90 per cent in May 2022);155 and another poll by KIIS in February 2024 found that 69 per cent of Ukrainians believe that Zelensky – whose presidential term is due to end in

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146 President of Ukraine, ‘Address by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy “February. The year of invincibility”’.
148 President of Ukraine, ‘We are 730 days closer to victory: Address by the President of Ukraine’ (24 February 2024), available at: [https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mi-stali-na-730-dniv-blizhchi-do-peremogi-zvernennya-prezide-89217].
149 Vasila Stepanenko and Jamey Keaten, ‘Ukraine’s “invincibility” centers offer refuge, resilience’ (29 November 2022), available at: [https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ap-ukraine-kyiv-bucha-russia-b2235049.html].
152 Max Hunder, ‘Ukrainian troops battle exhaustion as war drags into second winter’ (3 November 2023), available at: [https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukrainian-troops-battle-exhaustion-war-drags-into-second-winter-2023-11-03/].
154 Vigers, ‘Ukrainians stand behind war effort’.
May 2024 – should continue to serve as president until the cessation of martial law. Zelensky’s use of resilience discourse has arguably contributed to maintaining public morale, which, in turn, has helped to keep the country largely united behind him. As discussed, Zelensky often underscores the need for unity, and ‘among Ukrainians, there is an unconditional demand for unity and the avoidance of internal strife.’ As the final part of this section discusses, however, Zelensky’s use of resilience discourse is not just important domestically.

Resilience and calls for additional military support

In Zelensky’s speeches, resilience is also doing significant work at the international level, by helping to strengthen Ukraine’s requests for further and increased military support. In a speech in January 2023, for example, he underlined that ‘Russian aggression can and should be stopped only with adequate weapons … Weapons on the battlefield. Weapons that protect our skies.’ He also expressed his gratitude to ‘all our units who demonstrate the resilience Ukraine needs, exhausting the occupier and destroying it.’ In another speech just a few days later, he stressed that the situation in eastern Donetsk – in cities such as Bakhmut and Vuhledar – was ‘very tough’ and that Ukraine needed more weapons and faster deliveries. He additionally drew attention to the resilience of those fighting on the front line, pointing out that ‘confronting this [situation] requires extraordinary resilience and a full awareness by our soldiers that in defending Donetsk region they are defending all of Ukraine.’ In a recent speech in April 2024, in which he underlined the ‘absolute and urgent necessity’ of bolstering air defences in the Kharkiv and Sumy regions, he thanked Ukrainian soldiers and commanders, insisting that ‘the resilience of each of them is the resilience of our entire Ukraine.’

In other words, by interspersing calls for additional weapons with references to resilience, Zelensky is effectively using the concept to communicate and reinforce the message that Ukraine’s soldiers are doing everything they can to secure the country’s freedom – and that Western powers need to do the same. Further highlighting this is a speech he gave at the National Defense University of the United States, in which he stated: ‘Ukrainians haven’t given up and won’t give up. We know what to do. You can count on Ukraine, and we hope, just as much, to be able to count on you.’

Interestingly, and relatedly, in some of his speeches, Zelensky himself makes direct reference to what resilience is doing in the war. Exemplifying this is a speech that he delivered on 20 February 2023, on the occasion of US president Biden’s visit to Ukraine. In the speech, in which Zelensky mentions resilience five times, he maintains that ‘no element of Ukrainian life is fragile anymore and will never be fragile. And our resilience is a powerful contribution to the resilience of all freedom-loving nations in the world.’ In this example, thus, resilience is ‘at work’ in making clear

\[156\] Anton Hrushetskyi, ‘Dynamics between May 2022 and October 2023 of the perception of the appropriateness of criticism of possible erroneous and incorrect actions of the authorities’ (2 November 2023), available at: [https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1323&page=1].

\[157\] President of Ukraine, ‘Russian aggression can and should be stopped only with adequate weapons’ (26 January 2023), available at: [https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/rosijsku-agresiju-mozhna-j-treba-zupinyati-lishe-adekvatnoyu-80633].

\[158\] Reuters, ‘Ukraine needs more weapons faster, Zelenskiy says’ (30 January 2023), available at: [https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/zelenskiy-ukraine-needs-more-weapons-faster-2023-01-29/].

\[159\] President of Ukraine, ‘Bolstering air defense for Kharkiv, Sunny and our southern regions is an urgent necessity’ by the President of Ukraine’ (4 April 2024) available at: [https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/posilennya-ppo-dlya-harkivshini-sumshini-pivdennih-regioniv-90057].


what Ukraine is contributing to the liberal international order and, thus, in reinforcing Ukraine’s international significance. Indeed, Zelensky specifically underscores in the speech that President Biden’s visit ‘is an indicator of how resilient Ukraine is. And how important Ukraine is to the world’.162

Finally, just as Western powers are using resilience to deflect from divisions among themselves, as the previous section demonstrated, Zelensky is doing the same. He needs as many governments as possible to stand with Ukraine, in order to maximise military support for his country, and he uses resilience discourse to help minimise existing divides. In particular, he emphasises that Ukraine’s resilience and the qualities that he associates with it have brought countries together (which, in reality, is only partly true).163 In an address on Ukrainian Independence Day on 24 August 2022, he commented that ‘the courage of the Ukrainian people has inspired the whole world’. He further insisted, inter alia, that ‘from now on, every history book will have a new section: “When Ukraine united the world”’.164 Later, in a speech delivered on the first anniversary of the Russian invasion, he proclaimed that ‘Ukraine has surprised the world. Ukraine has inspired the world. Ukraine has united the world. There are thousands of words to prove it, but a few will suffice. HIMARS, Patriot, Abrams, IRIS-T, Challenger, NASAMS, Leopard’.165 In other words, resilience discourse is helping to make salient the imperative of unity and continued military support for Ukraine.

What these above examples further elucidate, thus, is that resilience is a ‘concept at work’ in the war in different ways and at different (interconnected) levels. The fact, moreover, that there are common themes in Zelensky’s speeches and in the speeches of various Western leaders – including the idea that Ukrainian resilience is inspiring – signals the importance of thinking about intertextuality itself as a cross-scale concept involving different levels.

Conclusion

According to McGreavy, ‘a primary problem with resilience is that it ignores its own discursivity, which constrains how we might come to know and do resilience differently’.166 This article has focused directly on this discursivity. Analysing the frequent use of resilience discourse in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, both internationally and domestically, it has not only made an original contribution to the study of resilience in conflict settings but has also demonstrated how we might indeed come to know resilience differently – as an important ‘concept at work’ – in terms of what it does. It has told a story of different resiliences, reflecting different systems and system dynamics, intersecting and working together at different scales, for specific political ends. Additionally, thus, it has offered a new way of thinking multi-systemically about resilience, and, by extension, about resilience and complexity.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the frequent use of resilience discourse in relation to the war in Ukraine is not unproblematic. First, as in other contexts, it is essential to ask critical questions, such as ‘resilience of what and for whom?’167 This article’s analysis demonstrates that resilience has been selectively invoked in a way that prioritises Western policy objectives, while neglecting how countries in the Global South have been massively and unevenly affected by the war.


163 According to Miliband, the UK’s former secretary of state for foreign and Commonwealth affairs, ‘the war has certainly united the West, but it has left the world divided. And that rift will only widen if Western countries fail to address its root causes.’ David Miliband, ‘The world beyond Ukraine: The survival of the West and the demands of the rest’, Foreign Affairs, 102:3 (2023), pp. 36–43 (p. 36).

164 Zelensky, A Message from Ukraine, p. 113.

165 President of Ukraine, ‘Address by President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy “February. The year of invincibility”’.


shocks and stressors of the war. Not only does this lend support to the argument that ‘hierarchies of Whiteness continue to operate globally’, but it also helps to explain why some countries in the Global South have not joined the West in condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine. As one commentator argues, ‘increasingly, the poor are saying to the rich that your priorities won’t mean more to us until ours mean much more to you.’ In other words, there are significant issues regarding the inclusiveness of the discourse.

Second, and relatedly, the war in Ukraine makes salient that resilience can easily become a homogenising discourse that dilutes individual experiences and the myriad ways that people deal with and manage adversity. Zelensky’s use of resilience particularly highlights this. In very difficult and challenging situations, including war and armed conflict, resilience – to reiterate an earlier point – is often an imperative rather than a choice, yet this does not mean that individuals necessarily consider themselves to be resilient or feel a sense of resilience. During the Russian assault on Avdiivka, for example, the city’s citizens had to increasingly rely on their local invincibility centre, which, for some of them, became their home. Moreover, those who stay put in a particular area may do so due to lack of alternative options. This was the case for 88-year-old Anatoliy, who refused to leave Bakhmut. He had lost his wife, was all alone, and asked: ‘Where am I going to go? Let them kill me here.’

When resilience is presented, however, as being fundamental to the ultimate success of the war and, in Zelensky’s words, ‘the protection of our entire state’, it potentially reduces the possibilities for citizens to be – at least outwardly and publicly – anything but strong and resilient. To be clear, this is not to minimise the strength and courage that many Ukrainians have shown. The point, rather, is simply to stress that a meta-narrative of resilience, like all narratives, ‘both illuminates and occludes’ – and what it occludes is also an important part of the war in Ukraine and of people’s lived experiences of it.

These issues notwithstanding, the war in Ukraine is now in its third year and the longer the conflict goes on, war fatigue among Ukrainians will almost certainly increase – as will divisions among Western powers over continued military support to the country. Factors such as the US presidential elections in November 2024 and the current war in Gaza will further test Western resolve and unity regarding Ukraine. It seems likely, therefore, that resilience will remain an important ‘concept at work’ in the war, but it remains to be seen whether and to what extent it will continue to work in the same way. Looking ahead, one possible scenario is that as the geopolitical landscape changes, new crises erupt, and Western priorities shift, resilience as a concept will start to do less ‘work’ internationally in relation to the war but take on, in parallel, an increased importance within Ukraine itself.

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171 See, e.g., Sean A. Kidd and Larry Davidson, “You have to adapt because you have no other choice”: The stories of strength and resilience of 208 homeless youth in New York City and Toronto, Journal of Community Psychology, 35:2 (2007), pp. 219–38; Pilav, ‘Before the war, war, after the war’, p. 34.
Acknowledgements. I would like to sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers who helped me to get this article ready for publication. They invested considerable time and effort in providing me with constructive comments and detailed suggestions, for which I am truly grateful, and their guidance was invaluable.

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Cite this article: Janine Natalya Clark, ‘Resilience as a ‘concept at work’ in the war in Ukraine: Exploring its international and domestic significance’, Review of International Studies, 50 (2024), pp. 720–740. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000305