

# Constructing the narrative of resilient society: self-organising from relief to recovery

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**Abstract.** This study examines how the narratives of a resilient society are constructed in the midst of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on its way to recovery. The study adopts a constructivist-ontological take on resilience, which extends the view of resilience beyond that in crisis management as a post-disaster strategy and focuses on resilience at-war, as the conflict is ongoing. By analyzing the notes of participant observation and interview data with various actors (Finnish and Ukrainian civil society organisations, municipalities, individuals, and media) the study will explore how narratives of resilience in Ukrainian society on the way to recovery, take shape in the discussions around self-organizing of directly affected people, and citizens willing to help, who are active in groups that build collective structures of support, empowerment, and visible politics. The study aims to make several contributions: firstly, to the humanitarian logistics and supply chain management literature by clarifying insights on the recovery phase in an extended conflict context; secondly, to resilience literature by opening up how the narratives of resilient society take shape in the context of an extended crisis, when the disruption to normality is ongoing and recovery is perceived differently by various actors.

**Keywords:** resilience; self-organising; humanitarian aid; post-war recovery.

## 1 Introduction

Since the early start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the topics of recovery and reconstruction have been in the media and reports of international agencies and institutions. With Ukraine step by step returning its territories these topics became more prominent in Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC 2022) in Lugano, the World Urban Forum (WUF 2022) in Katowice, the International Expert Conference on the Recovery, Reconstruction, and Modernization of Ukraine (2022) in Berlin, and the ReBuild Ukraine Conference in Warsaw (2023) (Udovyk, Kylymnyk, Cuesta-Delgado, and Salvador, 2023). However, for some actors, the idea of recovery and reconstruction still stays elusive and far away, as long as the war continues. While a number of initiatives have been implemented on a governmental level for recovery, such as the Ministry of Reconstruction and the Agency of Restoration (assisted by the Ministry of Digitalization), and civil society initiatives for recovery are visible (e.g. RISE coalition, BUR, Center for Economic Strategy, DiXi Group), there's a lack of clarity on how civil society actors can be included in the planning of postwar reconstruction besides supporting government agenda (Mandaville, 2023). If Ukraine really intends to develop a resilient society, inclusion and transparency should be the key principles of the country's transformation agenda (Grävingsholt, Faust, Libman, Richter, Sasse, and Stewart, 2023).

One way to fulfill these principles is enabling civil society actors to raise the challenges created by war. The challenges may be less visible to government structures but well-understood by the civil society actors (Mandaville, 2023). However, transparency and inclusion both are precarious conditions (Dobusch, Dobusch and Müller-Seitz 2019). European partners highlight that Ukraine's recovery also involves tensions, such as unresolved

corruption, and lack of trust in the Ukrainian justice and rule-of-law (Grävingsholt et al., 2023). As Udovyk et al. (2023) argue, a listening agency needs to be developed in order to counter potential gaps in inclusion. Listening agency is understood here as “enforcing multi-level governance dynamics, providing both top-down and bottom-up interaction mechanisms” (Udovyk et al., 2023, p. 26) that could facilitate a wider perspective on reconstruction. Currently, as illustrated in the quote below from recent reports, for individual citizens there is a lack of clarity on how various initiatives will benefit the recovery of Ukraine and how inclusive those initiatives are; to what extent different visions of recovery and reconstruction, as well as different pathways towards them as part of the process of enacting resilience, are considered:

“Electronic Management System can only communicate e.g. a number of destroyed schools, it does not give a space to questions “Will we need to rebuild all the schools we had? Or should we build one school for the whole town since almost all the kids are abroad? or should we start a new digital education hub? And what kind of initiatives are already innovating on this in our city? And this is something that we all as a society have to discuss.” (Udovyk et al., 2023, p. 27).

In this study, we explore the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine. Precisely, we investigate how recovery is planned and executed by different actors. Moreover, we study the perceptions of different actors on the recovery in Ukraine and Finland, and what hurdles and bottlenecks are experienced by them. Furthermore, we explore the narrative of a resilient society and how it is constructed by different actors (Finnish and Ukrainian CSOs, municipalities, individuals, and media).

## 2 Theoretical background: perspectives on resilience

We adopt a constructivist-ontological take on resilience, which extends the view of resilience beyond that in crisis management as a post-disaster strategy defined as the “ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management” (UNDRR 2016). Instead, we focus on how resilience is activated to secure and manage life and thoughts (Grove, 2013, 2014; Pugh, 2014; Zebrowski, 2013). In that regard, we examine resilience at war (Kurnyshova, 2023), or in other words, how stories on resilience take shape in the midst of disturbance, as the conflict is ongoing. We approach the narrative of societal resilience in the form of a discussion around the efforts of these actors intended towards recovery and reconstruction in their broader sense, as in self-organizing of directly affected people, and citizens willing to help, becoming active in groups that build collective structures of support, empowerment, and visible politics.

Norris et al. (2009) describe the resilience of a community as consisting of a process linking a network of adaptive capacities (resources with dynamic attributes) and related sub-capacities, which cover information and communication (trusted sources of information, skills and infrastructure, responsible media, narratives), community competence (community action, critical reflection and problem solving skills, flexibility and creativity, collective efficacy and empowerment, political partnership), social capital (attachment to place; sense of community; citizen participation, leadership & roles (formal ties); organizational linkages & cooperation; social embeddedness (informal ties); perceived (expected) social support; received (enacted) social support) and economic development (equity of resource distribution; level and diversity of economic resources; fairness of risk and vulnerability to hazards). Resilience is by their definition linked to a “positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance” (Norris et al., 2009, p. 130), so promotes recovery from a disaster or a crisis.

Hyvärinen and Vos (2015, p. 589) describe the role of communication in facilitating community resilience considered as “an interface function to build partnerships of resilience”. In the pre-crisis phase, the role of communication is to create awareness and preparedness via building partnerships and through preparedness education. During and after crises, communication facilitates collaboration through e.g., the exchange of information, supporting engagement, and monitoring of information needs. Moreover, communication helps bridge diversity and stay connected via different communication media. The outcome is empowerment that requires effective networks of cooperation between various societal actors, covering both public and private organisations and civil society groups.

### 3 Method

*The research question for this research is formed as follows:*

How are the recovery of Ukraine and the resilience of Ukrainian society perceived by different actors in Ukraine and those providing help in Finland (CSOs, municipalities, individuals, and media)?

Data for this study will be collected through participant observation, and interviews with different actors participating in reconstruction and recovery directly and indirectly (without categorizing their efforts as such). Additional data will be collected from media sources (social media, reports, newspapers, and journals) and by attending the events devoted to the topic of reconstruction, serving as collaborative and discussion platforms for the attendees. Data access for observation and interviews will be arranged through engaging in volunteering initiatives organized by some of the actors (civil society organisations and grassroots volunteer initiatives in Finland and Ukraine) and snowballing when searching for other actors involved in recovery efforts.

For data analysis, we will follow the narrative inquiry approach (Ludema, 1996; Nye, 1997; Sutton, 1987). In analysing our findings, we will focus on uncovering how various interpretations of reconstruction and recovery are construed by different actors, and which tensions and connections are present in and between these interpretations.

Potential actors to engage with in Finland: Logistics center, Auta Ukrainaa, Operation Hope, city of Helsinki (Espoo, Vantaa, Turku).

Potential actors to engage with in Ukraine: points of invincibility (punkty nezlamnosti) – points in the city for people to get short-term access to food, water, wifi, organized by local citizens and other unorganized civil society actors.

### 4 Expected contribution

The findings of this research could contribute to the crisis management, humanitarian logistics and supply chain management literature by clarifying insights on the recovery phase in an extended conflict context, both of which are areas of research that lack previous knowledge.

Moreover, with this study we hope to contribute to resilience literature by opening up how the narratives of resilient society take shape in the context of an extended crisis, such as the invasion of Ukraine by Russia when the disruption to normality is ongoing and recovery is perceived differently by various actors: as the ongoing focus of efforts vs a stage to await and prepare for, requiring more stability and resources.

We hope this research will provide insights and develop the discussion on different resilience narratives (for example, state resilience vs. societal resilience (Bosse and Vieira, 2023)), and uncover possible learning for other states (see narratives towards a more resilient European society by Manca, Benczur, and Giovannini, (2017) from Ukrainian narratives of resilience.

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