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WAR-TESTED RESILIENCE IN UKRAINE: SURVIVING YEAR ONE

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ABSTRACT:

The war in Ukraine, a NATO-Russian proxy war, continues to influence the global security architecture, but the immediate consequences are felt especially by those in the conflict area. The local population decided, through the actions carried out from the very first moment of the invasion, to oppose the Russian occupation and was categorized as an extension of the armed forces and a central pillar of the Ukrainian resistance. The paper analyzes the pressures to which the civilians in Ukraine were subjected during the first year of the conflict, such as: the bombing of residential areas, energy blackmail, torture, killings, rapes, robberies or the deportation of children from the occupied areas. After a year of war, the resilience of the population continues to fuel the morale of frontline troops, and a future peace agreement cannot be concluded without holding those guilty of war crimes or crimes against humanity accountable.

KEYWORDS:

Ukraine, proxy war, population resilience, war crimes

1. Introductory and methodological aspects

The illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the armed aggression against Ukraine in 2022 continue to influence the security environment "*characterized by a number of challenges, both military and non-military, that have the potential to irreversibly affect regional and global security*" (Cîrdei & Ispas, 2022, p. 12) and bring about major changes in the volatile balance of international relations. Taking into account the reconfirmation of the military, political, economic or informational support provided by Western states centered on NATO (2023), it is not a mistake to say that the theater of operations in Ukraine represents a proxy war between NATO and the Russian Federation.

The motivation for the Russian invasion stems from Russian strategic culture and the desire to keep Ukraine within the Soviet sphere of influence, and the replacement of political power in Kremlin will not change this (Götz & Staun, 2022).

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The military operation in Ukraine, planned on the principle "*shock and awe*" meant deploying overwhelming forces that would paralyze Ukraine forces reaction and their will to fight. It was a demonstration of military force that was not limited to the occupation of Donbas and aimed at invading the whole of Ukraine. It generated a "full scale" asymmetric war in which air, naval and land forces were initially deployed both from the South (Crimea peninsula), the East (Donetsk and Luhansk regions) and also from the North (Belarus) with the aim of occupying the capital, Kyiv, and changing the pro-Western government with one favorable to the Kremlin. The reaction of President Zelensky was not correctly anticipated by Moscow analysts and "*the actor who played the role of the president on TV*" proved to be a real defiant leader during the war (Berlinger, 2022). His courage to ask for "*munitions for the fight*" in exchange for the "*taxi offered for evacuation*" generated a general mobilization of the masses against the invasion and increased the will of the population to resist.

The scientific approach undertaken started from the premise that the uncertainty and complexity of the challenges in the security/operational environment will require new ways of thinking, planning and acting. The theoretical-praxiological approaches are based on well-known scientific theories, on observations from recent military operations and, above all, on the identified trends regarding the deployment of military actions and their concept in the estimates regarding the need for capabilities in the operational environment and on the physiognomy of military confrontations. This article also uses open source content analysis to examine the reaction of the Ukrainian population to the 2022 Russian invasion and the atrocities to which civilians were subjected in the first year of the conflict in Ukraine.

2. Local population reaction to Russian troops invasion

To the south and east, the military actions of the Russians succeeded in occupying the territories connecting the Crimean peninsula and the Luhansk region, but the reaction of the population was not what the "liberation" forces expected. The "special operation" carried out with the aim of "denazifying" the country and "liberating" the people from the influence of a "greedy", "decadent", and "undemocratic" West, faced the Ukrainian national sentiment and the "liberating brothers" were met with large protests in which men and women stood in front of the tanks shouting "*Go home, it's not your country*" (Pora, 2023). In the entire country, reactions and responses of the population began to appear, which took various forms of manifestation:

- Groups of civilians positioned themselves at the entrances to localities and asked the advancement of Russian military vehicles to be stopped (*Unarmed Ukrainians stop Russian tank from entering village,* 2022). The intention to block Russian military convoys was also manifested individually, in the "tank man" style of Tiananmen Square China (Gabbatt, 2022).
- The civilians involved in various actions to support the military effort, like removing anti-tank mines from communication routes *(Fearless Ukrainian removes land mine from road while smoking cigarette*, 2022).
- The reaction of the population showed the Russian soldiers that they are not welcome and that the Russian occupation is not accepted by even making threats against the soldiers, such as the Ukrainian woman who asked a Russian soldier to carry sunflower seeds in his pocket foretelling his death on the battlefield (Sharma, 2022). Or the act of poisoning with pies, that led to the death of 2 Russian soldiers and the hospitalization of 28 others due to the "hospitality" of the Ukrainian population (Quinn, 2022).
- Local communities flooded their houses and agricultural lands in order to deny the access of Russian armored convoys and to buy time for the preparation

of defensive positions in the north of Kyiv (Epstein, 2022).

- At the beginning of the invasion, immediately after the occupation of the southern and eastern regions, demonstrations and protests were organized in cities such as Kherson in which the Russians began to use live ammunition to disperse the crowds gathered to demand the withdrawal of the Russians (*Russian troops 'open fire on protestors' as they run for their lives in Kherson, n.d.; See Russian soldier fire over the heads of Kherson protesters, 2022*). The messages of the population indicate that "liberation" is actually "occupation" and the "Ukrainian brothers" are not looking for external Russian support.
- In time, these reactions were increasingly clear and the partial victories (e.g. the resistance in Azovstal, the withdrawal of Russian forces from the northern part of Ukraine) increased the resilience of the civilian population against the invasion. Those who decided to leave their homes and go out of Ukraine continued to support the resistance effort of the ones who remained through raising funds and providing aid to refugee women and children (A story of 2 volunteers in Ukraine, n.d.). Those who remained resisted the invasion by volunteering as part of the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) - an integral part of the Ukrainian Armed Forces - or by being actively involved in logistical support of the war effort. The mobilization and activities of the local population, such as the preparation of Molotov cocktails (*Ukrainian civilians prepare Molotov cocktails for Russian attack*, 2022; *Making Molotov Cocktails, Ukrainian Civilians Prepare To Defend Homes*, 2022; *People of Ukraine Make Molotov Cocktails, Petrol Bombs to Set Fire on the Invading Russian Army*, 2022), the transformation of civilian cars into military vehicles (*See how civilian vehicles get transformed for Ukraine battlefield*, 2022), intelligence, the evacuation and supply of those from the directly affected areas were intensively publicized in social media, which led to the increase of the morale not only among the civilian population but also among the Ukrainian military forces.

These reactions and actions of civilians, intensely promoted by social media, made the Russians understand that the local population will not remain neutral and will continue to support the Ukrainian military forces in the effort to resist the invasion. The population started to be seen as an extension of the armed forces and a central pillar of the Ukrainian resistance, and victory for the Russians depends on destroying the population's will to resist.

3. The transition of the population from hostile to neutral status

The change in the status of the local population from the position of "neutrality" to that of "opposition" made the actions of the Russian forces much more aggressive. Next we will highlight the worst cases (documented with the help of open OSINT sources) of attacks directed against the local population with the aim of breaking (destroying) their resilience.

Attacks on residential areas. Airstrikes and artillery bombardment occurred indiscriminately and included residential areas (apartment buildings, commercial areas, religious buildings, medical centers, schools, places of worship) in cities located on the territory of Ukraine, such as: Severodonețk (*El-Sherbiny, 2022;* McGarvey & Sands, 2022; *Severodonetsk mayor says just 20% of city under Ukrainian control*), Dnipro (Bamford, 2022; Laurence, 2022; Photos: Dnipro devastated by one of Russia's deadliest attacks, 2023), Kyiv (*Ukraine war: Russia attacks Kyiv striking two residential buildings*, 2022; *Kyiv apartment building hit as Ukrainians fight off Russian attacks across the country*, 2022; *Ukraine war: CCTV captures Russian missile strike on*

Kyiv in New Year's Eve attacks, 2023), Kherson (Deutsch & Voitenko, 2022), Kharkov (*Russian paratroopers and rockets attack Ukraine's second-largest city Kharkiv,* 2022; Missile hits central Kharkiv building as Russian attacks continue – video, 2022; *Ukraine: airstrike hits cultural centre in Kharkiv region*, 2022; *Ukraine: Massive destruction in Kharkiv after Russian bombardment*, 2022), Lviv (*Ukraine War: Lviv under attack from Russian missiles*, 2022; *Lviv residents during the attack in Ukraine on October 10th*, 2022), Mariupol (*Russian attack on residential building in Mariupol, Ukraine, captured by drone*, 2022), Odessa (*Odessa: Missile strike kills five as Russia continues to pound East Ukraine*, 2022), Borodyanka (*Destruction in the Ukrainian town of Borodyanka*, 2022), Kramatorsk (*Russian Missile Hits Apartments in Ukraine's Kramatorsk*, 2023), Izium (Ukraine: Izium Apartment Victims Need Justice', *Human Rights Watch*, 2023), Zaporoje (*Ukraine city of Zaporizhzhia devastated by Russian rocket attacks,* 2022; MSF teams treating patients after attack on Ukrainian residential building) or Kremenciuk (Subramaniam Tara, 2022). Cluster munition bombs designed to be scattered over large areas, containing several hundred "mini-bombs" called sub-munitions, were also used on residential areas. As they make no distinction between civilians, civilian property and military targets, the use of cluster bombs in residential areas is prohibited by international humanitarian law. The figures of casualties in Ukraine cannot be exact as many regions are still under the control of Russian forces (Draghicescu, 2022; Draghicescu, 2022). The same type of munitions was used on 8 April 2022 on civilians at Kramatorsk train station when two ballistic missiles equipped with cluster munitions dropped more than 50 submunitions on the boarding platform. The message inscribed on the remains of a rocket "Za detei - for children" shows the lack of humanity of those responsible (*Kramatorsk station attack: What we know so far*, 2022). In locations where urban battles took place such as Mariinka (Figure no. 1) (*Mariinka, distrus complet de ruși: Imagine apocaliptică prezentată de șeful administrației Zelenski*, 2023) or Bahmut the images are apocalyptic. All civilian infrastructure was destroyed as a result of Russian bombardment with missiles or field artillery.



Figure no. 1: The town of Mariinka completely destroyed after the conquest by the Russian forces

These attacks on residential areas are instruments of terror against the civilian population and aim to destroy the will to resist by creating an environment of insecurity that can be avoided by civilians by "submitting" and "accepting" the Russian occupation.

Destruction of critical energy infrastructures. The defeat of the will of the population to resist the invasion was not limited to attacking residential areas. Critical infrastructures were also targeted with the purpose to leave the population in dark and cold. The widespread and repeated attack by Russian forces on Ukraine's energy infrastructure was used by Russia using Iranian missiles and drones that left millions of civilians without access to electricity (*Ukraine: Russian Attacks on Energy Grid Threaten Civilians,* 2022). Russia tried to reduce the resilience of the population and decrease the morale of the soldiers in the front by putting pressure on their families, forced to live without access to essential services (health, communications) and resources (water, heat) vital to the population during the cold winter months.

Torture, killings, rapes, robberies and deportation of children from occupied areas. Violent actions must not affect the civilians in the conflict zone. A number of media organizations and trusts documented, after the first year of the war, several cases of Russian military forces committing violations of the laws of war against civilians in the occupied areas. These include cases of torture, arbitrary arrests, rapes, deportation of children and summary executions of prisoners of war. Soldiers were also involved in looting civilian property, including food, clothing and firewood. The massacre in Bucha was the one made public through the voice of the journalists from New York Times (Al-Hlou, 2022) Deutsche Welle (DW News) (*Fact-check: Disinformation about the killing of civilians in Bucha?* 2022), The Telegraph (*Rebuilding Bucha after a massacre - War in Ukraine a year on | Life on the frontline*, 2023), Al Jazeera (*Ukraine war: International condemnation over Bucha killings*, 2022), AP/FRONTLINE (*Crime Scene Bucha: How Russian Soldiers Ran a 'Cleansing' Operation in Ukraine,* 2022), Channel 4 (*Russia killed Bucha civilians in deliberate massacre, Ukraine says*, 2022). But cases of torture and killings were recorded in most localities in the occupied regions like those identified in Harkiv (*10 torture sites in 1 town: Russia sowed pain, fear in Izium,* 2022; Query, 2022; *They beat to hurt and humiliate: Kozacha Lopan residents told about atrocities of Russian occupiers*, 2022; Tyshchenko, 2022) (Vovchansk, Kupiansk, Velykyi Burluk, Izium, KozachaLopan), Kherson (*Inside Russian 'torture chambers' in Ukrainian city of Kherson,* 2022; *See images Ukraine says show Russian torture chambers in Kherson*, 2022) or Balaklia (Yang, Ho, Belam & Farrer, 2022). According to statements given by the population of the occupied regions, residents were regularly stopped on the streets or were "visited" at home and searched in an effort to find possible "pro-Ukrainian" materials (including video content on mobile phones). Thousands of civilians (including teachers or journalists, not just pro-Ukrainian activists) were physically and mentally abused in such facilities (*Guardian: Russian torture chambers in Kherson Oblast "not random but rather part of a carefully thought-out plan"*, 2023). Interviews with civilians in regions that were formerly under Russian occupation mention that the routine security checks were followed by arrests or even the execution of those found with pro-Ukrainian messages on their phones or camouflage clothing (*UN report details summary executions of civilians by Russian troops in northern Ukraine*, 2022). Evidence of the killing or ill-treatment of Ukrainian prisoners of war was identified in Russian social media networks that allow the posting of hateful media (e.g. Telegram). The castration and killing of a Ukrainian prisoner generated a wave of outrage and anti-Russian sentiment around the world (Beaumont, 2022). Harsh interrogation or even torture of

prisoners of war is a practice found in many military conflicts and its practice in Ukraine, detailed above, was not a total surprise to the international community. But the castration and killing of a prisoner along with promoting the video on social media seems like an act from the panoply of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) or other terrorist groups. Another case, much more recent, has sparked harsh reactions from the population of Ukraine and the international community, because of a 12 second video showing an apparently unarmed man in a uniform with a Ukrainian flag insignia on his arm, killed by gunfire after he is heard saying: "Slava Ukraine" ("Glory of Ukraine") (*Ukraine names soldier appearing to be executed in viral video*, 2023). The body of the Ukrainian soldier has not yet been recovered, nor is the identity of the Russian soldiers guilty of war crimes known (as of this writing – April 2023). We consider it is not an isolated case and the notoriety of the committed crime is due to the perpetrators, as they incriminate themselves by recording the evidence and promoting it in the public space.

The report of the International Independent Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine details cases of *sexual violence* against civilians (and other violations of human rights and international humanitarian law) in Kyiv, Chernihiv, Kharkiv and Sumy regions. The Commission also details a case of sexual assault that involved a 4-year-old girl or rape directed against an 83-year-old woman (Macias, 2022). The details of the review are horrifying and mention that in some cases spouses and family members, including children, were forced to witness sexual assaults by Russian troops who "frequently seemed under the influence of alcohol".

The prosecutor's office in Ukraine is investigating (April 2023) 171 cases of sexual violence committed by Russian troops, but the figures may be much higher because there is no possibility to conduct investigations inside the occupied territories (*Ukraine war: Govt probing 171 cases of sexual violence committed by Russian troops, says First Lady Zelenska*, 2023).

Taking into account the gravity of the facts listed above, we understand that *robbery* is the least of the problems of the Russian soldiers who invaded Ukraine. This criminal behavior has been evident since the early days of the invasion in northern Kyiv. Project Hajun activists in Belarus released images and later the names of Russian soldiers filmed sending packages of looted goods from Ukraine to various parts of the Russian Federation (Coynash, 2022). These were stolen from shops in occupied cities or even from the homes of civilians where they took shelter. Witnesses interrogated after the invasion stated that they were forced to live in cellars and the houses left without owners were looted by Russian soldiers (Coynash, 2022). The stolen goods were taken out of Ukraine to Belarus and sent to families or put up for sale in Belarusian markets. The Military Intelligence Service of Ukraine reported that the Russian soldiers opened a market to sell looted goods in the Belarusian town of Naroulia. Items stolen "on offer" included washing machines and dishwashers, refrigerators, cars, bicycles, works of art, toys or cosmetics. According to another investigation, published by the independent news site Mediazona, Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine sent home at least 58 tons of looted goods in the first 3 months of the invasion. Analyzing video footage from a checkpoint in the Russian border town of Valuyki, Mediazona it was identified that soldiers sent home TV sets, tents or even sneakers, car tires and cans. On 29 April, an unidentified Russian officer allegedly sent an Orlan-10 military drone, probably stolen from his own military. According to Mediazona, the largest number of packages was sent between the end of March and the beginning of April - right after Russian troops left their positions in northern Ukraine and near the capital Kyiv. On April 4 alone, soldiers sent 4 tons of parcels believed to be filled with looted goods (*Russian Soldiers Send Home*

58 Tons of Looted Items from Ukraine — Investigation, 2022). In the south too, Kherson was looted as part of an "organized retreat" of Russian forces. At the end of October, Russian soldiers destroyed power lines and knocked down mobile phone towers. They began withdrawing early to avoid the experience of a hasty departure from Kharkov where, thanks to the Ukrainian counteroffensive, they left behind wounded people, classified documents and military equipment worth millions of dollars. Apart from their own equipment, the Russians also left Kherson with civilian goods found in the town. In order to get their hands on the spoils of war, they evacuated civilians claiming that Ukraine would soon begin attacking the town with artillery and that the area was no longer safe, while looting homes and businesses in the town they had occupied since the beginning of the war (Lovett, 2022). They did more than stealing from homes, garages or shops. They stole art collections, ancient Greek artifacts, religious icons, silver, gold, books and historical documents from the town's museums and libraries (Nemtsova, 2023; *Ukraine: Russians Pillage Kherson Cultural Institutions*, 2022). An interesting case is that of the Russian soldier who stole a surveillance camera but failed to reset the existing settings and the camera could be accessed by the former owner (Heren, 2022). He was able to watch live images recorded by the camera in the privacy of the Siberian home of the "new" owner.

Evidence emerged that Russia *has illegally deported* more than 16,000 children on Russian territory since 2014. In the southern city of Kherson, witnesses say that Russian forces took children from at least two orphanages as they withdrew from the city in November 2022 (Hilliar, Volochine, & Dermas, 2023). Moreover, there is talk of a systematic network of at least 40 Ukrainian child custody centers involved in a program operated by the Russian government. "Russia's Systematic Program for the Reeducation and Adoption of Ukrainian Children" describes a system where children are sent to Russia and offered for adoption to Russian families (Amos, 2023). The program is recognized by the Russian government which claims it is a humanitarian effort to integrate children abandoned or traumatized by the war in Ukraine. The evidence collected in this case of mass deportation of defenseless children led to the first prosecution of the authorities responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Thus, on 17 March 2023, the ICC (International Criminal Court) issued arrest warrants for two persons in the context of the situation in Ukraine: Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin (President of Russia) and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova (Commissioner for Children's Rights) (Deutsch & Sterling, 2023) accused of the following war crimes: illegal deportations of the population (children) and illegal transfer of the population (children) from the occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation (Armstrong, Radford & Gardner, 2023; *Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova*). It is a huge blow and a victory for all those fighting for the respect of human rights in Ukraine even if no one expects that President Putin will be handed over to a Nuremberg-like court of law (Ott, 2022).

4. Conclusions

The Kremlin government has repeatedly denied all allegations that its forces did not distinguish between civilians and military, but evidence on the field shows that Russian forces have repeatedly committed abuses and war crimes. The refusal of the population to accept the Russian occupation led to its being considered hostile and to the "legalization" of the attacks against civilians. It is hard to believe that all acts recorded against Ukrainian civilians in the first year of the war (attacks on residential areas, killings, torture, robbery, rape, deportation of people) were committed by lower-ranking soldiers without the order or consent of their direct superiors.

One of the factors leading to abuses on population is the acute lack of discipline, very common among Russian military forces (*No Discipline,*
No Rules, No Honour - Ukrainian Separatist about the True State of Russian Army, 2022; *Elite Russian Soldiers Caught Drinking: Ukrainian Army Ambushed Putin's Drunken Soldiers!* 2023; *'Give us alcohol' - Drunken Russian soldiers attack store, destroy windows,* 2022; *What the Russian army really looks like*, 2022; *Great Panic In Russia: Drunk Russian Soldier Blew Himself Up!* 2023). The presence of the Wagner group in Ukraine multiplied this phenomenon due to the mercenaries recruited from Russian prisons. Sending some structures made up of ex-convicts to the front increases the dirty nature of the war. The presence of Wagner fighters in the trenches is motivated by the cleaning of criminal records and surviving for 6 months at the front is all that matters (Jackson, 2023). The notions of ethics, morality and norms of international humanitarian law are non-existent, a fact supported publicly even by the leader Wagner (Gupta, 2023).

Unfortunately, the evidence collected in Ukraine shows the development among the Russian forces of a toxic mindset of winning the war at any cost. The lack of military discipline and the perception that no one will be held accountable for abuses or war crimes is turning Ukraine into an extremely dirty theater of military operations. The ICC's decision to issue an arrest warrant against President Putin is a small victory, but it is hard to imagine a scenario in which the sitting president of the Russian Federation will be put on trial. Not even in the case of a clear victory for Ukraine. But the essential condition to achieve lasting peace on NATO's border is based on holding accountable those who executed, allowed and especially those who ordered war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine.

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