

Community Cooperation and Social Resilience in a Low-Trust Wartime Context: Evidence from Ukraine

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Abstract: Ukraine entered the 2022 war with relatively low levels of institutional trust, raising an important question about how communities remain socially functional during extended crisis conditions. This article examines the role of community cooperation in sustaining social resilience during the 2022–2024 war period. Drawing on polycentric governance and antifragility frameworks, the paper analyzes social cohesion indicators from institutional reports alongside documented cooperation practices to assess how cooperation developed at the local level during the conflict. The analysis focuses on interactions between local authorities, civil society organizations, and volunteer networks engaged in community support and recovery initiatives. The findings suggest a functional decoupling between institutional trust and community cooperation: while trust in public authorities fluctuated during the war, community cooperation remained relatively stable. Informal local networks played an important role in organizing support activities and maintaining basic services when formal institutions were under pressure. These findings suggest that community-level cooperation can remain stable even in low-trust wartime environments, highlighting the importance of local coordination for sustaining social resilience.

Keywords: social resilience, civil society, volunteer networks, Ukraine, institutional trust

JEL: H12; H83; F22

1. Introduction

The 2022 Russian invasion placed local communities in Ukraine under sustained pressure. Millions of people were displaced, and local systems were forced to operate under prolonged uncertainty. Estimates indicate that around 3.6 million individuals remain internally displaced inside Ukraine, creating long-term strain on communities and public services (IOM, 2025). Research on crisis response suggests that social resilience often depends on civic participation and local cooperation, particularly when institutional capacity is under strain (Revtiuk and Ivanova, 2024; Volacu and Aligică, 2023). Despite this, many communities adapted through civic cooperation and volunteer action, rather than solely through formal institutional planning. This matters because community mobilization occurred in a context where institutional trust had historically been fragile.

The Ukrainian case shows how adaptive capacity works in continuous high-intensity crisis conditions. Wartime conditions often generate extended uncertainty and institutional pressure. In these environments, community-level cooperation becomes a practical mechanism to preserve basic social functioning.

This paper studies how social resilience developed at the community level in Ukraine between 2022 and 2024. The focus is on the interaction between local authorities, civil society organizations, and volunteer networks formed during the crisis. Also, this paper combines trust indicators with documented cooperation practices to explain how community resilience emerged in a wartime context characterized by low institutional trust. The main research question is: What forms of cooperation helped communities remain socially functional during armed conflict? A secondary question explores whether social resilience can emerge in contexts characterized by historically low institutional trust. While existing studies often examine institutional coordination during the war, this article focuses on the relationship between institutional trust and community-level cooperation.

This article makes two contributions to the literature on crisis governance and social resilience. First, it provides an exploratory empirical account of the divergence between institutional trust and community-level cooperation during the 2022-2024 war period in Ukraine. Second, it interprets this divergence through the lenses of polycentric governance and antifragility, suggesting that community cooperation may remain stable even in low-trust wartime environments.

2. Literature review

Social resilience is commonly defined as the ability of societies to adjust and maintain cohesion during crises (UNDP, 2024). Community resilience research emphasizes resilience as a continuous process grounded in collaboration, civic participation, and trust between members of society (Revtiuk and Ivanova, 2024). Social resilience is commonly defined as the ability of societies to maintain cohesion and adapt during crises (UNDP, 2024).

The concept of resilience has been expanded in recent literature beyond simple recovery from shocks. Antifragility perspectives suggest that social systems can adapt and sometimes strengthen when exposed to disruption and stress (Vâlsan, Druică, and Aligică, 2025). From this

perspective, crises may generate new forms of cooperation and social solidarity, not only facilitating recovery but also strengthening adaptive capacity beyond pre-crisis levels. This interpretation is particularly relevant in wartime conditions, where communities must reorganize everyday life under persistent uncertainty.

Trust is an important component of social resilience. The literature on social cohesion distinguishes between horizontal trust and vertical trust. Horizontal trust refers to trust between members of a community. Vertical trust refers to trust in public institutions and authorities. Horizontal trust is linked to cooperation, mutual support, and everyday interactions between citizens. Vertical trust reflects the relationship between society and the state. Frameworks such as reSCORE analyze social cohesion through these two types of relations, looking at both people-to-people and people-to-state interactions (UNDP, 2024).

Decentralized decision-making and multi-level coordination have received growing attention in governance research. Polycentric governance approaches explain how decision-making can be shared across institutions, organizations, and communities rather than concentrated in a single center of authority (Lofthouse and Kral, 2025). Recent empirical work has applied polycentric frameworks to the Ukrainian wartime context, identifying mechanisms such as local knowledge facilitation, resource mobilization, and policy experimentation at the community level (Keudel and Huss, 2024; 2025). While Keudel and Huss focus on governance mechanisms from the perspective of local authorities, the present article takes a complementary approach: rather than examining how institutions coordinate, it examines how society-level trust and cooperation indicators evolve in relation to each other, drawing on secondary survey data rather than primary fieldwork with local governments.

Democratic resilience research, similarly, emphasizes the importance of citizen participation and civic engagement for maintaining system stability under pressure (Volacu and Aligić, 2023). Cooperation among public institutions, civil society organizations, and other actors often generates structural tensions over authority, resources, and coordination. These tensions are not necessarily dysfunctional. They are often part of complex crisis governance arrangements in which different actors operate simultaneously. Previous collaboration experience and existing coordination mechanisms influence how effectively such partnerships function during emergencies (Foss et al., 2025).

Pre-existing systemic capacity also shapes crisis outcomes. Crisis response capacity is strongly influenced by institutional infrastructure, organizational routines, and pre-crisis coordination mechanisms. Emergency reception systems and humanitarian response structures are often part of broader contingency planning rather than exceptional arrangements created only during crises. Resilience outcomes depend partly on institutional capacities that exist before the onset of crisis (Breivik-Khan, 2025).

Despite these developments, the existing literature pays less attention to how these dynamics interact in real time during high-intensity wartime conditions. The Ukrainian case provides an opportunity to observe resilience as an ongoing social process. Resilience becomes visible through everyday cooperation practices, local coordination, and informal support mechanisms that operate alongside formal institutional responses.

This article examines these dynamics through the case of Ukraine during the 2022–2024 war period. These perspectives, polycentric governance, antifragility, and democratic resilience guide the analysis that follows.

3. Research methodology

This study is based on a qualitative document analysis of secondary sources published between 2022 and 2025. Two types of sources were used. The first consists of institutional reports. The primary source is the UNDP reSCORE report (UNDP, 2024), selected because it provides structured, survey-based indicators of social cohesion and trust across multiple measurement waves. Additional data was drawn from IOM displacement reports, selected for their coverage of the wartime period under study. The second type consists of academic literature on social resilience, crisis management, and polycentric governance. In total, the analysis draws on a small set of institutional reports and recent academic studies directly addressing wartime cooperation, social cohesion, and crisis governance in Ukraine. These were identified through a citation snowballing procedure, starting from keywords on the topic and expanding through their reference lists.

The analysis focused on three dimensions across the selected sources: how trust and social cohesion indicators changed over time, what forms of cooperation between local authorities, civil society, and international organizations were documented during the war, and what conditions shaped these cooperation patterns. For each source, relevant indicators and cooperation examples were extracted and organized around these dimensions. The aim was to identify recurring patterns rather than to test causal relationships.

Particular attention was given to reSCORE indicators measuring trust in public authorities, such as accountability of authorities and authority care, and indicators measuring community-level dynamics, such as community cooperation and sense of civic duty. Comparing these two groups allowed a contrast between how institutional trust and community cooperation evolved during the wartime period.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, no formal coding procedure was used; instead, the analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns across sources. The analysis draws on polycentric governance and antifragility frameworks as interpretive lenses rather than formal analytical categories.

4. Results

This section presents the empirical findings, organized around two dimensions: documented cooperation patterns at the community level, and social cohesion and trust indicators drawn from the reSCORE framework.

The evidence indicates that social resilience in Ukraine during the war was closely linked to community-level cooperation and civic mobilization. Much of the recovery effort relied on local partnerships rather than exclusively on centralised coordination. Institutional reports describe locally organized initiatives, including shelters for internally displaced persons, psychological

support services, educational programs for children, and assistance networks for vulnerable populations (UNDP, 2024; UN Ukraine, 2024).

Volunteer networks and NGOs often handled rapid delivery and last-mile distribution, while local administrations coordinated access to facilities and basic registration procedures. This division of labor reduced pressure on formal institutions and helped maintain service continuity at the local level.

4.1 Cooperation patterns during the war

Reports and field studies describe several examples of cooperation at the local level during the war. Local administrations, international organizations, civil society groups, and volunteer networks worked together to restore services and support affected communities. One example is the Ivankiv community, which suffered extensive destruction during the 2022 invasion.

Reconstruction activities included repairing the local high school and cultural center, restoring more than 250 private homes, and installing 18 prefabricated houses. Local administrations coordinated reconstruction priorities and access to municipal infrastructure, while international organizations provided financial and technical support (UN Ukraine, 2024).

Similar patterns were reported in Markariv, Drohobych, and Mykolaiv, where recovery focused on restoring public buildings, repairing infrastructure, and supporting displaced individuals (UN Ukraine, 2024). At a broader scale, recovery programs reached 236,355 people across 19 “hromadas” (local municipalities) in 11 “oblasts” (administrative regions) through 25 local projects. These projects focused on rebuilding housing, restoring community services, and repairing public infrastructure damaged during the war (UN Ukraine, 2024).

Educational infrastructure illustrates the same cooperation pattern. Reconstruction programs helped restore learning environments for students in Chernihiv and Mykolaiv, while additional support was provided to schools in Cherkasy, Kirovohrad, and Poltava regions. These initiatives involved cooperation between local administrations, education authorities, and international organizations (UN Ukraine, 2024).

Community initiatives also played an important role when infrastructure systems were disrupted. Field studies describe residents organizing alternative water sources, installing generators, and coordinating local food distribution when supply systems were interrupted (Revtiuk and Ivanova, 2024).

Local administrations, civil society groups, volunteer networks, and international organizations each addressed different aspects of the crisis. This distributed pattern of cooperation provides the empirical basis for the analysis in the discussion section.

4.2 Social cohesion and trust indicators

Table 1 presents selected reSCORE indicators for Ukraine across three measurement points: before the war, the wartime peak, and the most recent wave in 2024. The pre-war values reported in the reSCORE dataset are based on retrospective survey questions collected in 2023. While this limits strict longitudinal comparability, the indicators still provide a useful approximation of how perceptions of trust and cooperation evolved during the wartime period.

Table 1: Selected Social Cohesion and Trust Indicators in Ukraine (reSCORE Framework)

Indicator	2021	(2023) Wartime peak	2024
Accountability of authorities	2.7	4.1	3.1
Authorities care	2.6	4.6	3.0
Community cooperation	5.1	5.5	5.2
Generalized trust	3.4	3.8	3.6
Intergroup trust	3.2	3.7	3.5
Sense of civic duty	5.4	6.6	6.2

Source: Author's compilation based on reSCORE indicators reported in UNDP (2024).

Note: The column '2021 (2023)' refers to the baseline measurement conducted in 2023 using retrospective questions about the pre-war period (2021), as reported in UNDP (2024). 'Wartime peak' refers to the highest value recorded across the 2022-2024 measurement waves.

All indicators are measured on a 0-10 scale based on the reSCORE methodology.

The reSCORE framework distinguishes between vertical cohesion, which captures relations between citizens and public authorities, and horizontal cohesion, which captures relations within society (UNDP, 2024). This distinction is central to interpreting the data. Indicators such as accountability of authorities and authority care measure the vertical dimension. Community cooperation, generalized trust, intergroup trust, and sense of civic duty measure the horizontal dimension.

The data show a clear divergence between the two dimensions. All vertical indicators declined significantly between their wartime peak and 2024, returning close to pre-war levels. Accountability of authorities dropped from 4.1 to 3.1, and authorities' care dropped from 4.6 to 3.0. At the same time, all horizontal indicators remained relatively stable or declined only marginally. Community cooperation stayed at 5.2, sense of civic duty at 6.2, and intergroup trust at 3.5. The consistency of this pattern across multiple indicators suggests that the divergence between institutional trust and community cooperation may represent a recurring feature of wartime social dynamics.

When formal institutions face overload, citizens tend to rely more heavily on community networks rather than disengaging (Revtiuk and Ivanova, 2024). The stability of horizontal cohesion indicators is consistent with this observation. The community cooperation score can also be read through an antifragility lens (Vålsan et al., 2025): rather than simply returning to pre-war levels after initial disruption, community cooperation remained functionally stable throughout a sustained period of external stress.

Taken together, the data suggest that community-level cooperation remained relatively stable even when trust in public authorities fluctuated during the wartime period.

4.3 Pre-crisis capacity and resilience outcomes

The cooperation patterns documented in section 4.1 did not emerge from nothing. They developed within institutional structures, coordination routines, and civil society networks that

existed before the war began. Emergency reception and humanitarian infrastructures are better understood as part of broader contingency planning rather than exceptional crisis arrangements (Breivik-Khan, 2025).

The relative stability of horizontal cohesion indicators shown in Table 1 reflects not only the adaptive responses of communities during the war, but also the organizational capacity that was already in place beforehand. Communities where civil society organizations were active and where local administrations had prior experience coordinating with external partners were better positioned to maintain basic services under pressure (Breivik-Khan, 2025). Local resilience is therefore more likely to be sustained when coordination structures, networks, and emergency routines already exist or can be rapidly activated.

This does not reduce the significance of the wartime mobilization observed. It does suggest that resilience outcomes are partly path-dependent: what communities were able to do during the war was shaped by what already existed before it started.

5. Limitations and Future Research

This study relies primarily on secondary data from institutional reports, which may emphasize institutional perspectives more strongly than informal community dynamics. The analysis focuses on pattern identification rather than causal relationship testing and covers the 2022-2024 period specifically.

A potential geographic bias should also be considered. The reports analyzed may not fully capture developments in all regions of Ukraine, particularly in areas affected by occupation or active hostilities where data collection remains difficult (UNDP, 2024; IOM, 2025).

Future research could expand through field research, including interviews with local actors, quantitative analysis of trust and cooperation dynamics over extended timeframes, and comparative studies across conflict-affected societies.

6. Conclusions

The findings are consistent with research showing that resilience can emerge through decentralized cooperation and local adaptive capacity during crises (Volacu and Aligică, 2023; Lofthouse and Kral, 2025). They are also consistent with antifragility perspectives, which suggest that crises can strengthen adaptive capacity rather than simply disrupt it (Vâlsan, Druică, and Aligică, 2025).

Three observations stand out. First, the data show a consistent divergence between vertical and horizontal social cohesion indicators throughout the wartime period. While trust in public authorities declined significantly, community-level cooperation, civic duty, and intergroup trust remained relatively stable. This pattern, consistent across multiple indicators, supports the interpretation that community cooperation may have functioned as a partial substitute for institutional trust. Second, the stability of horizontal cohesion indicators across measurement waves suggests a sustained pattern rather than a temporary spike. Third, the distributed character of the observed cooperation, with local authorities, civil society, volunteer networks, and international

organizations each addressing different aspects of the crisis, is consistent with polycentric governance dynamics.

For public administration, the main implication is that pre-crisis capacity matters. Volunteer networks and civil society organizations function better as crisis partners when they are already embedded in coordination structures before a crisis begins, rather than mobilized as a last resort. In this sense, strengthening community-level cooperation should be considered a central component of long-term resilience strategies in conflict-affected societies.

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