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National Resilience in Ukraine's War: Insights for Singapore

By Ong Weichong

SYNOPSIS

Ukraine and Ukrainians have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the ongoing war against Russia. The Ukrainian experience provides valuable lessons that Singapore can learn to strengthen national resilience in testing times.

COMMENTARY

War creates exceptional circumstances in which the resilience of a nation is severely tested. As the war in Ukraine grinds towards its three-year mark, Ukrainians have consistently demonstrated their collective capacity to respond to adversity.

The remarkable resilience of Ukrainians has not gone unnoticed. Several countries, notably the Baltic states, have looked to their experience to contextualise lessons and to strengthen their own national resilience frameworks.

While there are significant differences between Ukraine and Singapore regarding geopolitical realities, demographics, socio-economic circumstances, and societal norms, Ukraine's resilience presents crucial insights on how Singapore can better prepare for significant crises and disruptions.

As much as the COVID-19 pandemic offers Singapore valuable learning points on crisis response and national resilience, the next crisis will likely differ in character, magnitude, and scale. An examination of Ukrainian patterns of resilience in the most testing of circumstances allows the identification of structural elements useful for Singapore's efforts at building and sustaining national resilience.

It is simplistic to explain the tenacity of the Ukrainians as a national resistance to the Russians or as a response to the existential nature of the conflict. A closer examination

of the patterns of Ukrainian resilience reveals a strong sense of civic and local identity that translates to civic cohesion. Additionally, effective cross-sectorial communication, collaboration and synergy have allowed much of Ukraine to regain a high degree of normalcy despite disruptions from Russian air and drone strikes.

Drawing from the Ukrainian experience of the last thirty-odd months, three main structural elements in sustaining national resilience are relevant to Singapore. First, enabling cross-sectorial collaboration in crisis response. Second, strong civic cohesion. Third, regaining normalcy in testing times.

Enabling Cross-Sectorial Collaboration in Crisis Response

Cross-sectorial collaboration is essential in crisis response. However, this does not come intuitively to organisations used to developing solutions and drawing plans in silos. Maintaining cross-sectorial structures and expertise is challenging as it requires consistent effort at communication and collaboration with organisations that respond to problems differently.

Since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea in Ukraine, Ukraine and its international partners have invested immense efforts in ramping up its cross-sectorial capacity in response. The impact of these efforts has been felt in all sectors of society, from the economy to education.

One such example is the "Resilient Ukraine" programme. Supported by international partners, notably Estonia, "[Resilient Ukraine](#)" enables resilience-building through cross-sectorial training and crisis simulation exercises that bring together local communities, professionals, administrators, and non-governmental organisations.

Another initiative is the "[Ukraine Calling](#)" programme, which focuses on project-oriented cross-sectorial capacity building. This European effort, consisting of Ukrainian, German, French, Polish and Belarussian partners, aims to develop cross-sectorial competencies and local development in education, human rights, culture, media, and academia.

Initiatives such as Resilient Ukraine and Ukraine Calling allow for the sharing of lessons learnt in cross-sectorial coordination and building at the local, regional, and inter-agency levels and the transmission of expertise at the whole society level.

Importance of Civic Cohesion

The high level of cross-sectorial collaboration in crisis response stems from Ukraine's strong civic cohesion. The 2023 United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) report on [Social Cohesion in Ukraine](#) noted that the sense of civic duty among Ukrainians has risen since 2021.

What is noteworthy about the UNDP report and similar surveys is the firm belief in individual responsibility for Ukraine's future and the personal impact of decision-making. There is a strong sense of active citizenry and [self-reliance](#). Ukrainian citizens believe they can come together to influence decisions on the country's fate and support their fellow citizens.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainians have stepped forward to support their fellow citizens, individually and as communities. Many such actions are not anchored in official forms of engagement but are informal efforts stemming from a desire to help and make a difference. They range from acts of individual [civic resistance](#), such as misdirecting Russian troop convoys, to commercial companies switching production to military gear on their own initiative.

Regaining Normalcy in Testing Times

Ukraine's recent history, from the 1990s to the present day, has been a continuous test of its national resilience. Indeed, the three revolutions of 1990, 2004, and 2014 have been fundamental in shaping the national psyche of Ukrainian citizens to cope with successive crises and testing circumstances.

Ukrainian critical infrastructure, including for electricity, water and transport, has been hit continuously by Russian missiles and air and drone strikes in the last two and a half years. The latest round of aerial bombardment in late August on Ukraine's energy grid plunged Ukraine into a nationwide blackout and the prospects of a harsh winter.

Before the latest aerial barrage, Ukraine's public and private sectors had adapted to wartime conditions to ensure that essential services continued to be delivered throughout the country. Pensions and salaries of public servants continued to be paid. In 2023, lessons were delivered to [99 per cent](#) of enrolled students, including those in areas under active hostilities. Similarly, an estimated 90 per cent of Ukrainian medical clinics remained open, even in conflict areas.

Ukraine is at war, but much of Ukraine has regained a semblance of "normalcy" due in no small part to the collective effort of Ukrainians to work towards it. From the teachers and students who continue to show up for class to postal workers plying routes throughout the country, Ukrainians have demonstrated that some form of normalcy can be attained even in the most testing of times.

Lessons for Singapore

Since the inception of Total Defence (TD) in 1984, cross-sectorial collaboration in crisis response has been consistently practised nationwide through exercises such as the recent SG Ready.

Ukraine's experience has demonstrated that building cross-sectorial capacity and leadership takes time and effort. The TD framework that has enabled cross-sectorial collaboration in Singapore over the last forty years must be sustained beyond TD40 by a younger generation of cross-sectorial leaders.

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that size is not destiny. A state with scarce resources but an active citizenry and strong civic cohesion can collectively respond effectively to the devastating impact of a prolonged crisis caused by an external hostile force and put society back on the path of normalcy.

There is no substitute for good governance and effective state institutions for which Singapore is known. Still, there is much to learn from how the Ukrainian capacity for

self-reliance and sustained resilience has enabled individual citizens, local communities, and the nation to bounce back from the chaos of prolonged armed conflict.

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