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Youth Leadership in Wartime Ukraine: Resilience, Empowerment and Emerging Pathways

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ABSTRACT

Since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainian youth have emerged as central actors in humanitarian and civic initiatives. This study examines how these wartime conditions reshape leadership trajectories among young Ukrainians and identifies factors that sustain or hinder their agency. Based on interviews with young leaders, the research identifies three core findings. First, war-induced disruption and stress reshape routines but also spur resilience grounded in identity, moral responsibility, and mutual support. Second, young leaders experience empowerment as they reconstruct purpose through meaningful contributions, peer recognition, and public voice. Third, resilience and empowerment operate collectively, embedded in networks that provide emotional support and practical coordination. The study also highlights challenges for sustaining youth leadership post-conflict: without institutional flexibility, recognition of youth expertise, and equitable resources, wartime capacities may dissipate. Post-war reconstruction must integrate youth-led practices into governance and build inclusive, community-based infrastructures to sustain the leadership potential cultivated in war.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine War; Youth Leadership; Resilience; Psychological Empowerment; Social Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 significantly reshaped the political, economic, and social fabric of the country.¹ Tensions between Ukraine and Russia have escalated since 2014, following the annexation of Crimea² and conflict in the

Donbas region,³ creating a prolonged geopolitical crisis that preceded Russia's large-scale military offensive in

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¹ Gugushvili, A. (2025) 'Russian public perceptions of the war in Ukraine: A paradox of optimism amid crisis', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 33(3), pp. 950–974. doi:10.1080/14782804.2025.2472635.

² Katchanovski, I. (2025) 'The Russian annexation of Crimea', *Rethinking Political Violence*, pp. 85–98. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-98724-3_4.

³ Katchanovski, I. (2016) 'The separatist war in Donbas: A violent break-up of Ukraine?', *European Politics and Society*, 17(4), pp. 473–489. doi:10.1080/23745118.2016.1154131.

early 2022. The resulting disruption of education,⁴ mass displacement,⁵ and the widespread and multifaceted mobilisation of civil society on a scale previously unseen in Ukraine⁶ have redefined the personal and professional trajectories of Ukrainian youth. While the war has imposed profound psychological and structural challenges, it has simultaneously generated new forms of social engagement and leadership. Young Ukrainians have become central actors in humanitarian coordination,⁷ digital communication,⁸ and community resilience,⁹ assuming responsibilities that extend beyond conventional age or institutional expectations. These developments raise critical questions about how conditions of war reshape youth leadership trajectories, empowerment, and the potential for sustained influence in post-war reconstruction.

The conflict has accelerated a critical re-examination of conventional and emergent leadership models in Ukrainian civic and political life.¹⁰ Whereas older generations often embody hierarchical and institutionalised forms of authority, young Ukrainians increasingly exhibit horizontal, adaptive, and community-oriented modes of leadership.¹¹ Acknowledging that competing narratives of causality

and responsibility circulate among state and non-state actors, this article provides a concise, neutral background to situate the analysis rather than adjudicate historical claims. While the origins of the conflict remain contested,¹² this study adopts an analytical rather than political perspective, focusing on the responses and agency of young leaders within these circumstances. Such an approach ensures a balanced critique while maintaining focus on the social and psychological dimensions of leadership development under conditions of war.

The same conditions that catalyse leadership growth (continuous threat, unpredictability, and emotional fatigue) may simultaneously constrain well-being and motivation, thus limiting the sustainability of leadership capacities in post-war recovery. Understanding how young people sustain motivation, psychological empowerment, and resilience under such conditions is crucial for the development of long-term leadership ecosystems.¹³

In this study, youth refers to individuals aged 18–29, following the operational definition employed by the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine¹⁴ and

⁴ Ganguli, I. and Waldinger, F. (2023) *The impact of the war in Ukraine on science and Universities*, Centre of Economic Policy Research. Available at:

<https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/impact-war-ukraine-science-and-universities> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

⁵ Harris-Brandts, S. et al. (2024) 'Local impacts, global consequences: Assessing the mass displacement and migration tied to Russia's invasion of Ukraine', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 30(1), pp. 1–10. doi:10.1080/11926422.2024.2302476.

⁶ Dodds, K. et al. (2023) 'The Russian invasion of Ukraine: Implications for politics, Territory and Governance', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 11(8), pp. 1519–1536. doi:10.1080/21622671.2023.2256119;

Patel, S.S. and Erickson, T.B. (2022) 'The New Humanitarian Crisis in Ukraine: Coping with the public health impact of hybrid warfare, mass migration, and Mental Health Trauma', *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 16(6), pp. 2231–2232. doi:10.1017/dmp.2022.70.

⁷ Open Space Works Ukraine and NGO "Kyiv educational center 'Tolerspace' (2025) *Empowering youth in humanitarian action in Ukraine*, Humanitarian Leadership Academy. Available at:

<https://www.humanitarianleadershipacademy.org/resource/s/empowering-youthin-humanitarianaction-in-ukraine/> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

⁸ Ingram, G. and Vora, P. (2024) *Ukraine: Digital Resilience in a time of war*, Brookings. Available at: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Digital-resilience-in-a-time-of-war-Final.pdf)

[content/uploads/2024/01/Digital-resilience-in-a-time-of-war-Final.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Digital-resilience-in-a-time-of-war-Final.pdf) (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

⁹ Giordano, F. et al. (2024) 'Resilience processes among Ukrainian youth preparing to build resilience with peers during the Ukraine-russia war', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, pp. 1–13. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1331886.

¹⁰ Batryn, N. (2023) 'Wartime leadership in the context of organizational change theories', *International Science Journal of Management, Economics & Finance*, 2(1), pp. 96–103. doi:10.46299/j.isjmef.20230201.10.

¹¹ Kostiuchenko, T., Volosevych, I. and Info Sapiens (2025) *Impact of war on youth in Ukraine 2024 R E S E A R C H*, United Nations Development Programme. Available at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-01/undp-impactofwaronyouthinukraineen_v05.pdf (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

¹² Krasnodemska, I. et al. (2024) 'History as a weapon: Narratives and propaganda in the Russo-Ukrainian War', *Revista Amazonia Investiga*, 13(81), pp. 98–107. doi:10.34069/ai/2024.81.09.7.

¹³ Panter-Brick, C. (2023) 'Pathways to resilience and pathways to flourishing: Examining the added-value of multisystem research and intervention in contexts of war and forced displacement', *Development and Psychopathology*, 35(5), pp. 2214–2225. doi:10.1017/s095457942300113x.

¹⁴ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2021) *Adopted the law of Ukraine 'on the main principles of youth policy'*, Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. Available at: <https://www.rada.gov.ua/en/news/News/207410.html> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

compatible with the United Nations' flexible approach to youth age,¹⁵ which ranges in country-specific contexts. Leadership is understood as the capacity to mobilise, coordinate, and inspire collective action toward shared goals, regardless of formal position.¹⁶ Within this framework, young leaders include civic activists, volunteers, community organisers, entrepreneurs, and professionals who have assumed leadership responsibilities during or following the escalation of war. Their experiences represent a unique intersection between personal adaptation and collective transformation.

The analysis draws upon two intersecting theoretical frameworks that illuminate the internal and relational dimensions of youth leadership. Resilience theory explains how individuals and communities adapt positively under extreme adversity, focusing on mechanisms of coping and recovery.¹⁷ Psychological Empowerment Theory (PET) provides an internal dimension, highlighting meaning, competence, self-determination, and influence as core psychological factors that sustain agency and collective efficacy.¹⁸ Integrating these frameworks enables a more nuanced understanding of how psychological resilience can translate into social leadership in wartime settings. It also offers insights into how these adaptive mechanisms may influence young leaders' roles in peacebuilding and reconstruction.

The central research question guiding this article is: What key challenges and opportunities influence the development of young Ukrainian leaders in wartime and in the post-war period? To address this question, the study examines how wartime conditions have disrupted or accelerated youth leadership trajectories, education, and professional development; how resilience and empowerment manifest in the lived experiences of young Ukrainian leaders; and what forms of institutional or social support are needed to transform wartime leadership into effective peacetime capacities. By analysing these dynamics, the paper contributes to both theory and practice. It extends the academic

understanding of leadership development in high-risk environments¹⁹ by integrating psychological and sociological dimensions and offers policy-relevant insights for post-war reconstruction. The findings aim to inform youth policy, education, and mental health programming in Ukraine while providing comparative lessons for societies facing conflict or instability elsewhere.

The remainder of this introduction discusses the papers methodological approach. The remainder of the paper then proceeds with Section Two discussing the relevant literature and theoretical foundations of resilience and psychological empowerment. Section Three presents the lived experiences of war time youth in Ukraine, with empirical results related to structural and psychological challenges faced, the motivations for leadership, and their adaptive coping strategies, amongst other themes. Section Four discusses those results and findings in relation to resilience and empowerment as practices in Ukraine, utilising two 'mini-case studies' of Digital Defence Networks, and "Veteranka" (Women's Veterans Movement). Section Five offers reflections on what is needed in the future post-war conflict. Finally, the conclusion reiterates how young people have assumed responsibilities across societal spheres, functioning under structural disruption and psychological strain whilst demonstrating emergent forms of empowerment and using social networks to navigate uncertainty and maintain agency.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design to examine how young Ukrainians develop and sustain leadership capacities under the extreme conditions of war. It integrates empirical and interpretive components by combining semi-structured interviews with secondary analysis of academic, institutional, and media materials. This approach enables an understanding of leadership not as a fixed role, but as a fluid process shaped by disruption, adaptation, and identity formation.²⁰

¹⁵ United Nations (2008) *Definition of youth, UN Definition of Youth*. Available at:

<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/factsheets/youth-definition.pdf> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

¹⁶ Winston, B.E. and Patterson, K. (2006) 'An Integrative Definition of Leadership', *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, 5(2).

¹⁷ Southwick, S.M. *et al.* (2014) 'Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: Interdisciplinary perspectives', *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5(1). doi:10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338.

¹⁸ Spreitzer, G.M. (1996) 'Social structural characteristics of psychological empowerment.', *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(2), pp. 483-504. doi:10.2307/256789.

¹⁹ Schopf, A.K. *et al.* (2018) 'Leadership and safety in high-risk environments: Integration and development of a research agenda', *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2018(1). doi:10.5465/ambpp.2018.16164symposium.

²⁰ Skinner, S. (2020) 'Towards a theory of Leader Identity Formation and its application in executive coaching',

Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with eight young Ukrainians aged 18 to 29 who had assumed leadership roles across sectors such as volunteer networks, social enterprises, civic activism, and digital communication. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure sectoral and geographic diversity while maintaining relevance to the research focus. All interviews were conducted online in 2024 and lasted approximately 45 minutes. A flexible interview guide covered key themes, including leadership motivation, coping mechanisms, resilience, empowerment, and visions for post-war reconstruction.

Secondary sources included academic research, policy papers, NGO reports, and reputable media articles, selected based on their relevance to youth leadership in conflict zones and their recency. These were used to contextualise and triangulate the empirical findings, enabling a more nuanced understanding of systemic social transformations affecting youth leadership in wartime Ukraine. The integration of primary and secondary data thus enhances both the depth and reliability of the analysis.

As a Ukrainian researcher, I acknowledge my positionality as both an insider and an analyst. My national identity and lived experience granted me privileged access and cultural fluency, particularly in rapport-building with participants. At the same time, I have remained attentive to the interpretive distance required for academic rigour. This dual position offers unique insights, while also necessitating transparency regarding potential bias.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section acts as a literature review, discussing relevant texts and concepts around the role of youth in

Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal, 5(1), pp. 71–89. doi:10.22316/poc/05.1.07.

²¹ Berents, H. and Mollica, C. (2022) 'Youth and Peacebuilding', *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies*, pp. 1744–1760. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-77954-2_95.

²² Shapovalova, N. and Burlyuk, O. (2018) 'Civil society and change in Ukraine post-Euromaidan: An introduction', in *ResearchGate*. Hannover, Germany: Ibidem Press, pp. 11–40.

²³ Nikolayenko, O. (2024) 'Youth activism in Ukraine before and during the Russia-ukraine war', *Handbook on Youth Activism*, pp. 61–74. doi:10.4337/9781803923222.00015.

²⁴ Sott, M.K. and Bender, M.S. (2025) 'The role of adaptive leadership in times of crisis: A systematic review and Conceptual Framework', *Merits*, 5(1). doi:10.3390/merits5010002.

conflict and post-conflict settings. It also outlines the paper's theoretical framework in terms of understanding the psychological impacts of conflict and the resilience shown by societal actors.

2.1 Youth Leadership in Conflict Contexts

Youth leadership in conflict zones has attracted growing scholarly interest due to its dual role in fostering community resilience and catalysing social transformation. Traditionally framed either as passive victims or nascent peacebuilders, young people are now increasingly recognised as dynamic agents capable of initiating and sustaining meaningful change. In contemporary conflicts, youth are not merely recipients of humanitarian assistance but active contributors to civic mobilisation, decentralised governance, and collective resistance.²¹ The Ukrainian case exemplifies this evolution: since the Euromaidan protests in 2014,²² and particularly following the full-scale invasion in 2022, young Ukrainians have emerged as key figures in humanitarian aid, digital activism, and community-based coordination.²³

Existing research indicates that conflict accelerates transitions into leadership roles, often without formal promotion or institutional preparation.²⁴ In these environments, leadership is informal, improvisational, and community-driven, grounded more in legitimacy than in credentials. Ukrainian youth-led volunteer initiatives, digital coordination networks, and local defence groups exemplify this redefinition of leadership under duress.²⁵ Parallel dynamics have been documented in conflict-affected regions such as Rwanda²⁶ and Sierra Leone,²⁷ where youth leadership

²⁵ UNICEF (2025) *Youth at the Frontlines – UNICEF Emergency Response & Resilience Building in Ukraine*, Knowledge Unicef. Available at: <https://knowledge.unicef.org/resource/youth-frontlines-unicef-emergency-response-resilience-building-ukraine> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

²⁶ Habintwari, V. (2021) 'Youth Inclusive Initiatives and Reconciliation Process in Rwanda: A Case Study of Hope and Peace Foundation', *University of Rwanda* [Preprint]. doi:<https://dr.ur.ac.rw/bitstream/handle/123456789/1424/Habintwari%2520Vincent.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

²⁷ Ruppel, S. and Steinbach, L. (2023) 'Hopes and dreams: Youth activities in civil society organizations in post-conflict countries', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 28(3), pp. 533–548. doi:10.1080/13676261.2023.2279629.

often materialises through solidarity, creativity, and risk-taking in response to urgent needs.

Critically, such leadership is shaped by the interaction between personal capacities and contextual pressures. Individual traits such as adaptability, purpose, and emotional intelligence intersect with structural factors like institutional collapse, mass displacement, and digital infrastructure to produce new leadership ecologies.²⁸ Scholars such as Hannah et al²⁹ and Boin et al.³⁰ highlight the emergence of adaptive leadership in extreme environments, characterised by decentralisation, collective problem-solving, and rapid decision-making. This model aligns strongly with the Ukrainian experience, where horizontal and decentralised structures have outperformed bureaucratic institutions in responding to wartime challenges.³¹

Gender and intersectionality are also vital to understanding youth leadership in war contexts. Women, LGBTQ+ youth, and other marginalised groups often face exclusion from formal power structures yet play critical roles in caregiving, communication, and grassroots organising.³² In Ukraine, their visibility in digital resistance and volunteer networks signals potential shifts in social hierarchies and political participation norms.³³

Nonetheless, the literature often fails to address the sustainability and emotional toll of youth leadership in war zones. Although these roles foster agency and empowerment, they can also entail exposure to sustained trauma, moral injury, and burnout.³⁴ As such, youth leadership must be examined not only in terms of immediate impact but also through the lens of long-term well-being, support, and post-conflict integration.³⁵

2.2 Psychological Resilience and Conflict-Affected Youth

Resilience, broadly defined as the capacity to adapt and sustain functionality under stress, has become a central lens for understanding youth responses to conflict.³⁶ Contemporary psychological literature treats resilience not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic process shaped by social, cultural, and internal resources. In war-affected environments, resilience reflects both coping strategies and broader identity negotiations.³⁷ This is particularly salient for youth undergoing accelerated personal development under duress.

In Ukraine, resilience is not only about surviving conflict but also about constructing meaning, sustaining community, and cultivating leadership. Cross-context studies, from Sierra Leone to Syria, have consistently emphasised the importance of protective factors such as social connectedness, educational continuity, family cohesion, and civic engagement.³⁸ Despite institutional fragmentation, Ukrainian youth have constructed

²⁸ Patria, H. (2021) 'The role of leadership and decision-making under crisis: A bibliometric analysis and scientific evolution from 1962 to 2020', *Asia Pacific Management and Business Application*, 010(01), pp. 39–54. doi:10.21776/ub.apmba.2021.010.01.3.

²⁹ Hannah, S.T. et al. (2009) 'A framework for examining leadership in extreme contexts', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 20(6), pp. 897–919. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.09.006.

³⁰ Boin, A., Kuipers, S. and Overdijk, W. (2013) 'Leadership in times of crisis: A framework for assessment', *International Review of Public Administration*, 18(1), pp. 79–91. doi:10.1080/12294659.2013.10805241.

³¹ Keudel, O. and Huss, O. (2024) 'Polycentric governance in practice: The case of Ukraine's decentralised crisis response during the Russo-Ukrainian War', *Journal of Public Finance and Public Choice*, 39(1), pp. 10–35. doi:10.1332/25156918y2023d000000002.

³² Qureshi, I., Bhatt, B. and Shaikh, S. (2025) 'Empowering marginalized communities: A Framework for Social Inclusion', *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 26(4), pp. 1197–1221. doi:10.17705/1jais.00928.

³³ Opora UA (2025) *Social Cohesion in ukrainian society: Challenges and barriers for vulnerable groups, ОПІОА - Громадянська мережа - вибори в Україні - Election in Ukraine.*

Available at: <https://oporaua.org/en/viyna/social-cohesion-in-ukrainian-society-challenges-and-barriers-for-vulnerable-groups-25748> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

³⁴ Prudnikova, V. (2024) *Organizational support and its impact on Mental Health in Humanitarian Aid Volunteers*, UNF Digital Commons. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/etd/1293/> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

³⁵ Alias, A.M. (2015) *Reinventing the role of children and youth in post-conflict peacebuilding*, SIT Digital Collections. Available at: <https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/capstones/2787> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).

³⁶ Peltonen, K. (2024) 'Children and war – vulnerability and resilience', *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 22(3), pp. 340–352. doi:10.1080/17405629.2024.2382410.

³⁷ Breakwell, G.M. (2021) 'Identity resilience: Its origins in identity processes and its role in coping with threat', *Contemporary Social Science*, 16(5), pp. 573–588. doi:10.1080/21582041.2021.1999488.

³⁸ Machel, G. (2009) *Machel Study 10-Year strategic review: Children and conflict in a changing world*. New York, NY: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict : UNICEF.

decentralised systems of mutual aid and care, facilitating resilience through bottom-up collaboration rather than state-led provision.³⁹ Norris et al. articulate this as community resilience, a synergy between individual adaptation and collective infrastructure, directly applicable to Ukraine's youth-led networks.⁴⁰

At the individual level, resilience entails mechanisms such as cognitive reframing, meaning making, and perceived control. Masten and Reed's notion of "ordinary magic" captures the capacity of youth to transform adversity into personal growth.⁴¹ Ukrainian youth often frame their experiences within culturally embedded narratives of national endurance,⁴² thereby aligning resilience with broader collective identity.

However, critical voices in the literature caution against romanticising resilience. Prolonged exposure to violence and instability can lead to psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD. The valorisation of resilience may inadvertently stigmatise vulnerability or delay help-seeking behaviours.⁴³ Resilience, therefore, must be understood not as a moral imperative but as a fluctuating state, compatible with fragility and conditional on structural support. In wartime Ukraine, psychological resilience supports not only survival, but also mobilisation and leadership. However, it requires reinforcement through formal and informal care systems, recognition, and investment. Understanding these pathways is essential for sustaining youth leadership in post-conflict reconstruction.

2.3 Psychological Empowerment Theory and Its Application in Conflict Contexts

Psychological Empowerment Theory (PET) offers a valuable framework for understanding how individuals develop agency, competence, and purpose, especially within destabilised and disempowering contexts. Originally emerging from organisational psychology, PET conceptualises empowerment as comprising four dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact.⁴⁴ In conflict zones where formal institutions collapse, these internal capacities become vital mechanisms for mobilisation and leadership.

In the Ukrainian context, empowerment frequently emerges outside formal channels. Young leaders engaged in digital activism, humanitarian aid, and community organising have demonstrated autonomy, innovation, and moral responsibility, key markers of psychological empowerment.⁴⁵ Spreitzer et al. suggest that empowered individuals are more likely to assume leadership roles, particularly in contexts of institutional failure.⁴⁶ In Ukraine, youth have filled vacuums in governance and public services not because they were appointed, but because they were psychologically equipped and socially driven.⁴⁷

A central tenet of PET is the role of meaning-making in sustaining agency.⁴⁸ In high-risk environments, individuals must construct narratives that justify and elevate their engagement. Bandura's theory of collective efficacy complements PET by underscoring the role of group belief in facilitating individual empowerment.⁴⁹

³⁹ Deineko, O. (2023) 'Ukraine, war and resistance: Reshaping social cohesion', *Studia Socjologiczne* [Preprint]. doi:10.24425/sts.2023.146173.

⁴⁰ Norris, F.H. et al. (2007) 'Community resilience as a metaphor, theory, set of capacities, and strategy for Disaster Readiness', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(1-2), pp. 127-150. doi:10.1007/s10464-007-9156-6.

⁴¹ Masten, A.S. (2001) 'Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development.', *American Psychologist*, 56(3), pp. 227-238. doi:10.1037/0003-066x.56.3.227.

⁴² Korostelina, K.V. et al. (2025) 'Dynamics of National Identity Narratives in Ukraine', *National Identities*, pp. 1-25. doi:10.1080/14608944.2025.2473699.

⁴³ Drożdżek, B., Rodenburg, J. and Moyene-Jansen, A. (2020) "'hidden" and diverse long-term impacts of exposure to war and violence', *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 10. doi:10.3389/fpsy.2019.00975.

⁴⁴ Kraimer, M.L., Seibert, S.E. and Liden, R.C. (1999) 'Psychological empowerment as a multidimensional construct: A test of construct validity', *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 59(1), pp. 127-142. doi:10.1177/0013164499591009.

⁴⁵ Open Space Works Ukraine (2025) *Empowering youth in humanitarian action in Ukraine, Humanitarian Leadership Academy*. Available at: <https://www.humanitarianleadershipacademy.org/resource/s/empowering-youth-in-humanitarian-action-in-ukraine/> (Accessed: 12 November 2025).

⁴⁶ Spreitzer, G. M., De Janasz, S. C., & Quinn, R. E. (1999). Empowered to lead: The role of psychological empowerment in leadership. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 20(4), pp. 511-526

⁴⁷ Giordano, F. et al. (2024) 'Resilience processes among Ukrainian youth preparing to build resilience with peers during the Ukraine-russia war', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1331886.

⁴⁸ Spreitzer, G.M. (1996) 'Social structural characteristics of psychological empowerment.', *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(2), pp. 483-504. doi:10.2307/256789.

⁴⁹ Bandura, A. (2000) 'Exercise of human agency through collective efficacy', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 9(3), pp. 75-78. doi:10.1111/1467-8721.00064.

This dynamic is clearly visible in Ukraine, where shared goals and national solidarity have intensified youth commitment and expanded their perceived impact.

Intersectional dynamics further shape empowerment processes. While Ukrainian women and LGBTQ+ youth have gained visibility in civic efforts, structural and cultural constraints persist.⁵⁰ PET provides a lens for identifying these inequities and imagining inclusive leadership models that address them. Still, PET must be applied critically. Overemphasising internal capacities risks obscuring systemic violence and transferring the burden of resilience onto individuals.⁵¹ Empowerment should thus be seen not as an alternative to institutional support but as an argument for its reform and expansion.

2.4 Intersections Between Resilience and Empowerment: Implications for Youth Leadership

The intersection between resilience and empowerment provides a more complete framework for analysing youth leadership in conflict. While resilience enables endurance, empowerment facilitates action. Together, they explain how youth convert hardship into leadership and trauma into mobilisation.⁵² Empirical research supports this connection. Giordano et al. report that Ukrainian youth who exhibit high resilience are also more likely to engage in leadership initiatives, suggesting that resilience provides the foundation upon which empowerment builds.⁵³ Similarly, Norris et al. argue that empowered individuals are critical to community resilience, serving as facilitators, communicators, and organisers.⁵⁴

In Ukraine, youth-led mutual aid networks and volunteer platforms illustrate this dual process. These are not merely responses to need, but structures of

transformation, where individual growth and collective action co-develop. Projects such as the Come Back Alive Foundation exemplify how young people transform resilience into sustained leadership.⁵⁵ However, this synergy is not universally positive. It may mask burnout, create unrealistic expectations, or romanticise self-reliance. Effective support structures, educational, psychological, and institutional, are thus indispensable. Recognising the co-evolution of resilience and empowerment can guide policies that foster both personal capacity and systemic support for youth leadership.

2.5 Critical Gaps and Theoretical Limitations

Despite their relevance, existing theoretical frameworks reveal notable gaps when applied to Ukraine's ongoing war. Much of the literature remains situated in post-conflict or developmental contexts, rendering it less applicable to high-intensity, protracted crises. Resilience is frequently theorised as a recovery process rather than an ongoing mode of survival and leadership under duress.⁵⁶ Similarly, PET is often confined to structured environments such as NGOs or formal institutions, limiting its explanatory power for decentralised, informal leadership structures emerging in Ukraine. The fluidity, improvisation, and digital nature of wartime leadership require broader, more flexible theoretical lenses⁵⁷.

Region-specific research is also scarce. Most foundational studies derive from Western or Global South settings, raising concerns about generalizability.⁵⁸ Ukrainian academic voices remain underrepresented in English-language publications, contributing to a

⁵⁰ Matveieva, O. (2025) 'Social Mobilization in wartime Ukraine: The connection between Gender Identity, national unity, and Societal Transformation', *Journal of Gender Studies*, pp. 1–30. doi:10.1080/09589236.2025.2505558.

⁵¹ Shwaikh, M. (2023) 'Beyond expectations of resilience: Towards a language of care', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3(2). doi:10.1093/isagsq/ksad030.

⁵² United Nations (2016) 'Young People and Armed Conflict', *Routledge Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood*, pp. 332–340. doi:10.4324/9781315753058-52.

⁵³ Giordano, F. et al. (2024) 'Resilience processes among Ukrainian youth preparing to build resilience with peers during the Ukraine-russia war', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1331886.

⁵⁴ Norris, F.H. et al. (2007) 'Community resilience as a metaphor, theory, set of capacities, and strategy for Disaster

Readiness', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(1–2), pp. 127–150. doi:10.1007/s10464-007-9156-6.

⁵⁵ Klim, K. (2025) 'Caught in the Crossfire: Exploring Impacts on Young Adults in Russo-Ukrainian Conflict Zones', *ResearchGate* [Preprint]. doi:https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.31100.45444.

⁵⁶ Litz, B.T. (2014) 'Resilience in the aftermath of war trauma: A critical review and commentary', *Interface Focus*, 4(5). doi:10.1098/rsfs.2014.0008.

⁵⁷ Teixeira, J. et al. (2024) 'Empowering leadership in the military: Pros and cons', *Merits*, 4(4), pp. 346–369. doi:10.3390/merits4040026.

⁵⁸ Mazzega, P., Rugmini, D.M. and Barros-Platiau, A.F. (2025) 'Where is the "global south" located in scientific research?', *Earth System Governance*, 25. doi:10.1016/j.esg.2025.100269.

theoretical imbalance.⁵⁹ Finally, intersectional dimensions of youth leadership, particularly gender, age, and national identity, are insufficiently addressed. Feminist and postcolonial theories remain marginal despite the heavily gendered nature of war narratives and resistance movements in Ukraine.⁶⁰ This study seeks to address these gaps by offering grounded, empirical insights into how resilience and empowerment function as interdependent drivers of youth leadership in wartime Ukraine.

3. WARTIME YOUTH LEADERSHIP: LIVED EXPERIENCES

This outlines the impact of wartime conditions on the psychological and structural pressures impacting young people in Ukraine, and their resultant leadership trajectories. Making use of primary interview data to explore the lived realities of youth within a conflict, it explores how they adapt and resolve to perform leadership roles across a range of social spheres.

3.1 Structural and Psychological Challenges Faced by Young Leaders

Young leaders in wartime Ukraine must navigate severe structural disruptions that influence their personal development and daily functioning. The destruction of infrastructure, persistent blackouts, and interruptions to public services have made education, employment, and psychological stability increasingly difficult to sustain.⁶¹ As one Interviewee stated, "It is becoming less and less desirable to live in Ukraine,"⁶² highlighting the tension between patriotic commitment and the desire for safety and continuity. Another Interviewee echoed this sentiment: "I love my country, but I also want a future where I do not live in fear. For now, that future seems possible only abroad."⁶³

Beyond material instability, the war has reshaped the emotional and cognitive landscape of leadership. One Interviewee reflected on the shift in expectations: "Before the war, leadership meant

planning and coordination. Now, it means staying calm under bombardment, making decisions when everything is uncertain, and carrying the emotional weight of others."⁶⁴ The burden of emotional labour is considerable, as young leaders must often provide stability and reassurance while navigating their own fear, grief, and exhaustion.

Despite these pressures, many demonstrate sustained resilience anchored in identity, community ties, and moral responsibility. One Interviewee stated, "It is my family and my country that keep me going. Even when I doubt my path, I know who I am doing this for."⁶⁵ Another noted, "Giving up is not an option. If I do not stay active now, I will lose my future."⁶⁶ Here, resolve is not portrayed as heroic but as necessary and self-preserving.

Youth leadership under wartime conditions, therefore, unfolds where institutional scaffolding is weakened and emotional resilience becomes a core resource. These experiences underscore the need for policies that sustain not only material security but also psychological well-being and emotional capacity.

3.2 Motivations for Leadership

Despite the conditions of prolonged instability, many young Ukrainians describe their leadership roles as intentional and meaningful. Their motivations emerge from personal conviction, commitment to collective resilience, and a desire to contribute to national recovery. Though the war has disrupted expected life paths, it has also accelerated the formation of leadership identities.⁶⁷

Education played a significant motivational role for several participants by providing frameworks for interpreting the crisis and understanding agency. One Interviewee with a background in psychology explained, "Studying psychology did not just give me a degree, it gave me tools to understand what is happening in my own mind and help others stay stable too." The Interviewee noted: "My studies in international relations gave me the language, the

⁵⁹ Mazzega, P., Rugmini, D.M. and Barros-Platiau, A.F. (2025) 'Where is the "global south" located in scientific research?', *Earth System Governance*, 25. doi:10.1016/j.esg.2025.100269.

⁶⁰ Johnson, J.E. (2023) 'How Russia's war in Ukraine can change gender studies', *Frontiers in Sociology*, 8. doi:10.3389/fsoc.2023.1220438.

⁶¹ Pinchuk, I. et al. (2025) 'Braving the dark: Mental health challenges and academic performance of Ukrainian University students during the War', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 60(10), pp. 2505–2516. doi:10.1007/s00127-025-02867-7.

⁶² Interview 5

⁶³ Interview 4

⁶⁴ Interview 6

⁶⁵ Interview 5

⁶⁶ Interview 4

⁶⁷ Giordano, F. et al. (2024) 'Resilience processes among Ukrainian youth preparing to build resilience with peers during the Ukraine-russia war', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1331886.

frameworks, and the confidence to represent Ukraine in complex conversations with foreign partners.”⁶⁸

Motivation was frequently tied to emotional attachment to Ukraine and a sense of responsibility for reconstruction⁶⁹. As one participant expressed, “I do not see myself anywhere else. Helping rebuild Ukraine is not just a job, it’s a responsibility I feel every day.”⁷⁰ However, motivation is not static. Interviewees acknowledged fluctuations in energy and certainty, as instability interrupts work, study, rest, and personal life. This illustrates that leadership engagement in wartime is negotiated continuously between inner commitment and external strain.⁷¹

3.3 Adaptive Coping Strategies and Sources of Emotional Support

While wartime conditions place significant psychological demands on young leaders, many develop coping strategies that help sustain emotional functioning and leadership capacity.⁷² Several Interviewees described burnout, chronic stress, and emotional fatigue as ongoing challenges. One Interviewee described the cumulative strain of supporting others while lacking recovery time.⁷³ Another noted the difficulty of maintaining motivation amid infrastructural instability: “It is hard to stay focused on work when you are sitting in the dark, not knowing if there will be water or heat tomorrow.”⁷⁴

Educational environments occasionally provided stability through a sense of routine and identity continuity.⁷⁵ As one participant remarked, “The University gave me structure during a chaotic time. It

reminded me who I wanted to become, not just what was happening around me.”⁷⁶ Emotional support networks, particularly family and close friends, also functioned as key stabilisers.⁷⁷ One Interviewee stated, “Communication and support from family and friends helps me cope with my current circumstances.”⁷⁸

For displaced youth, coping was more complex. Several Interviewees described nostalgia, cultural dislocation, and uncertainty regarding future belonging.⁷⁹ One said, “I miss the small things, my street, my neighbours, the sound of my language around me. Here, everything feels unfamiliar.”⁸⁰ Another explained feeling suspended between worlds: “Even in safety, I feel displaced, like a guest everywhere I go.”⁸¹ For others, displacement strengthened purpose. One participant explained that the war “strengthened my commitment to advancing peace, stability, and prosperity in Ukraine and beyond.”⁸²

3.4 Leadership in Action: Civic, Digital, and Cultural Engagement

Wartime leadership among Ukrainian youth manifests through civic coordination, digital communication, community support structures, and cultural production.⁸³ As one Interviewee stated, “Leadership means staying optimistic and holding people together, even while making tough military and financial decisions.”⁸⁴ Another observed, “Leadership is not about being in charge anymore, it is about staying grounded when others are lost.”⁸⁵

⁶⁸ Interview 1

⁶⁹ Shportun, O. *et al.* (2024) ‘Personality adaptation in young Ukrainians during the War’, *Revista Amazonia Investiga*, 13(84), pp. 206–220. doi:10.34069/ai/2024.84.12.13.

⁷⁰ Interview 1

⁷¹ Braun, W.G., Von Hlatky, S. and Nossal, K.R. (2017) *Engagement between peace and war: How military institutions adapt*. Kingston, Ontario, Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Centre for International and Defence Policy, Queen’s University ; Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College.

⁷² Zueger, R. *et al.* (2022) ‘Effects of resilience training on mental, emotional, and physical stress outcomes in military officer cadets’, *Military Psychology*, 35(6), pp. 566–576. doi:10.1080/08995605.2022.2139948.

⁷³ Interview 1

⁷⁴ Interview 5

⁷⁵ Ivanov, D., Holub, N. and Solovey, O. (2025) ‘Education in times of war: Narrative accounts of displacement and continuity in Ukrainian schools’, *International Journal of*

Educational Narratives, 3(3), pp. 263–273.

doi:10.70177/ijen.v3i3.2207.

⁷⁶ Interview 3

⁷⁷ Eltanamly, H. *et al.* (2019) ‘Parenting in times of war: A meta-analysis and qualitative synthesis of war exposure, parenting, and child adjustment’, *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 22(1), pp. 147–160. doi:10.1177/1524838019833001.

⁷⁸ Interview 8

⁷⁹ Interviewees 4, 6, 7, 8

⁸⁰ Interview 6

⁸¹ Interview 8

⁸² Interview 3

⁸³ Open Space Works Ukraine and NGO «Kyiv educational center «Tolerspace» (2025) *Empowering youth in humanitarian action in Ukraine*, *Humanitarian Leadership Academy*. Available at:

<https://www.humanitarianleadershipacademy.org/resource/s/empowering-youthin-humanitarianaction-in-ukraine/> (Accessed: 12 November 2025).

⁸⁴ Interview 8

⁸⁵ Interview 2

Leadership also expands into new cultural and economic fields.⁸⁶ One participant highlighted the emergence of Ukrainian fashion brands due to the withdrawal of foreign competitors: “It is interesting to see how Ukrainian fashion labels are growing; they are filling the gap left by foreign brands and gaining real recognition.”⁸⁷ For some, leadership trajectories were interrupted by displacement, leading to uncertainty and re-evaluation of identity: “Before the invasion, I had a clear plan. Now, I do not know where I belong or what I am building toward anymore.”⁸⁸ Others experienced the war as a catalyst for professional and civic direction⁸⁹.

3.5 Gender, Inclusion, and Regional Variation in Leadership Pathways

Gender, social identity, and geography shape the forms and visibility of youth leadership during war. Women have been especially active in humanitarian coordination, digital outreach, and psychosocial support, though these forms of leadership often receive less public recognition than military or institutional leadership roles.⁹⁰

Regional context also matters. Youth in major cities often have access to organisational networks and educational environments that encourage initiative.⁹¹ In contrast, those in regions facing direct bombardment or occupation frequently engage in hyper-local mutual aid, which is less visible but essential for community survival.⁹² Displacement introduces additional challenges. Some relocated youth serve as cultural

mediators and advocates abroad, while others struggle with identity disruption and loss of belonging.⁹³

Recognising these differentiated leadership pathways is crucial for post-war reconstruction agendas. Support mechanisms must value diverse leadership forms rather than privileging only institutional or highly visible models.⁹⁴ The next section moves to recognising how these pathways and experiences link to core concepts that have been recognised in conflict and societal settings elsewhere.

4. RESILIENCE AND EMPOWERMENT IN PRACTICE

The previous section illustrated how wartime conditions intensify the psychological and structural pressures shaping young people’s leadership trajectories. Yet the same conditions also generate practices of adaptation, solidarity and meaning-making that allow young leaders to sustain agency amid disruption.⁹⁵ This section shifts from describing lived experiences to examining the processes through which resilience and empowerment are enacted in practice. Resilience is understood here not as an inherent personal trait, and empowerment not as an abstract ideal, but rather as relational, socially embedded capacities that develop through shared environments, collective action and identity-based support.⁹⁶

Resilience refers to the ability to maintain continuity of purpose, coordination and self-understanding despite instability. It emerges through networks of mutual reliance, flexible role-taking and the capacity to

⁸⁶ Derman, L., Skovronskyi, B. and Rusakov, S. (2023) ‘Fashion industry in Ukraine: Development and prospects’, *Baltic Journal of Economic Studies*, 9(2), pp. 118–128. doi:10.30525/2256-0742/2023-9-2-118-128.

⁸⁷ Interview 4

⁸⁸ Interview 7

⁸⁹ Interview 3

⁹⁰ Olivius, E. and Hedström, J. (2020) ‘Young women’s leadership in Conflict’, *Young Women and Leadership*, pp. 45–62. doi:10.4324/9780429261480-3.

⁹¹ Cattaneo, A. et al. (2022) ‘Economic and social development along the urban-rural continuum: New opportunities to inform policy’, *World Development*, 157. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.105941.

⁹² Pidkurkova, I. and Grünewald, F. (2025) ‘Mutual aid in times of crisis’ collection: Case study Ukraine, April 2025, Groupe URD. Available at: <https://www.urd.org/en/publication/mutual-aid-in-times-of-crisis-collection-case-study-ukraine-april-2025/> (Accessed: 12 November 2025).

⁹³ Polishchuk, O. (2024) *Transnational Experiences of Ukrainian Displaced Children and Youth*, Ukrainian Research Institute Harvard University. Available at: <https://www.huri.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum4931/files/huri/files/tcup-polishchuk2024-final-v2.pdf> (Accessed: 12 November 2025).

⁹⁴ Veli Korkmaz, A. et al. (2022) ‘About and beyond leading uniqueness and belongingness: A systematic review of Inclusive Leadership Research’, *Human Resource Management Review*, 32(4). doi:10.1016/j.hrmr.2022.100894.

⁹⁵ Seijts, G. et al. (2025) ‘Holding onto the victory after the victory: Leadership lessons from the war in Ukraine for recovery and positive change’, *Organizational Dynamics* [Preprint]. doi:10.1016/j.orgdyn.2025.101195.

⁹⁶ Drury, J. et al. (2019) ‘Facilitating collective psychosocial resilience in the public in emergencies: Twelve recommendations based on the Social Identity Approach’, *Frontiers in Public Health*, 7. doi:10.3389/fpubh.2019.00141.

reorganise practices when conditions change.⁹⁷ Empowerment is conceptualised as a process of strengthening one's sense of competence, meaning, autonomy and impact, enabling individuals and groups to shape their circumstances rather than merely withstand them.⁹⁸ Both resilience and empowerment are fluid and ongoing, shaped by cultural norms, emotional significance and access to collective resources.⁹⁹ As one interviewee explained, "even in moments of emotional exhaustion, I remind myself that no one else can take responsibility for my life, and if I do not hold myself together, no one will".¹⁰⁰ This shows how personal coping practices become intertwined with broader forms of collective resilience, reinforcing agency amid uncertainty.

To illustrate how these processes materialise in wartime Ukraine, this section discusses two case studies. The first focuses on youth-led cyber defence clusters in Kharkiv and Dnipro, where resilience takes the form of decentralised coordination and shared technical engagement. The second analyses the women's veterans movement "Veteranka", where empowerment emerges through identity reconstruction, collective voice formation and the reconfiguration of gendered expectations of leadership. Taken together, these cases demonstrate that youth leadership in wartime is grounded not in exceptional individual heroism but in collective structures of support and shared meaning, which allow young people not only to endure crisis but to shape its outcomes.

4.1 Resilience as Collective and Adaptive Capacity

⁹⁷ Barasa, E., Mbau, R. and Gilson, L. (2018) 'What is resilience and how can it be nurtured? A systematic review of empirical literature on Organizational Resilience', *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, 7(6), pp. 491–503. doi:10.15171/ijhpm.2018.06.

⁹⁸ Llorente-Alonso, M., García-Ael, C. and Topa, G. (2023) 'A meta-analysis of psychological empowerment: Antecedents, organizational outcomes, and moderating variables', *Current Psychology*, 43(2), pp. 1759–1784. doi:10.1007/s12144-023-04369-8.

⁹⁹ Dushkova, D. and Ivlieva, O. (2024) 'Empowering communities to act for a change: A review of the community empowerment programs towards Sustainability and Resilience', *Sustainability*, 16(19). doi:10.3390/su16198700; Terrana, A. and Al-Delaimy, W. (2023) 'A systematic review of cross-cultural measures of resilience and its promotive and protective factors', *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 60(4), pp. 733–750. doi:10.1177/13634615231167661.

¹⁰⁰ Interview 5

Resilience among young leaders in wartime Ukraine emerges as a dynamic relational process shaped by community, shared responsibility and continuity of purpose. As the previous section showed, young people frequently confront exhaustion, disrupted life pathways and emotional strain. However, rather than withdrawing, many remain active in civic, educational and professional spheres. This continuity is sustained by adaptive strategies that allow individuals and groups to retain coherence in an environment defined by unpredictability.¹⁰¹

A key feature of resilience in this context is its collective orientation. Young leaders draw stability from networks of trust, shared identities and collaborative forms of problem-solving. Group belonging, whether formed through educational communities, volunteer organisations, professional clusters or informal peer networks, provides emotional grounding and reduces isolation. These networks operate as distributed resilience systems in which the capacity to cope is reinforced through mutual support rather than held individually.¹⁰² One interviewee noted, "support from friends, family and my team gives me energy and motivation when everything feels unstable," highlighting how emotional connectedness becomes a crucial component of collective resilience.¹⁰³ Resilience also develops through adaptive coordination. Routines, communication channels and organisational practices are adjusted to accommodate instability. Flexible scheduling, decentralised information sharing and modular collaboration enable continuity even when infrastructure is disrupted. This adaptability matters not

¹⁰¹ Panter-Brick, C. and Leckman, J.F. (2013) 'Editorial commentary: Resilience in child development – interconnected pathways to wellbeing', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54(4), pp. 333–336. doi:10.1111/jcpp.12057; Ungar, M. (2011) 'The social ecology of resilience: Addressing contextual and cultural ambiguity of a nascent construct', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 81(1), pp. 1–17. doi:10.1111/j.1939-0025.2010.01067.x.

¹⁰² Aldrich, D.P. (2012) 'Building resilience: Social capital in post-disaster recovery.', *University of Chicago Press* [Preprint]. doi:10.7208/chicago/9780226012896.001.0001; Folke, C. et al. (2010) 'Resilience thinking: Integrating resilience, adaptability and Transformability', *Ecology and Society*, 15(4). doi:10.5751/es-03610-150420; Masten, A.S. and Obradović, J. (2008) 'Disaster preparation and recovery: lessons from research on Resilience in Human Development', *Ecology and Society*, 13(1). doi:10.5751/es-02282-130109

¹⁰³ Interview 6

only for practical functioning but also for emotional stability. Being able to act, however improvised the conditions, maintains a sense of agency.¹⁰⁴

Meaning-making further anchors resilience. Young leaders sustain engagement by situating their efforts within broader narratives of responsibility and collective survival. The war disrupts individual futures, yet many rearticulate purpose through identification with community, place and shared struggle. Resilience in this sense does not deny vulnerability; it allows action to continue alongside uncertainty.¹⁰⁵ Finally, resilience is non-linear. It fluctuates with emotional cycles, shifting conditions and the availability of support. What sustains resilience over time is not constant determination, but access to relational and structural conditions that allow individuals to recover and re-engage.¹⁰⁶ The below mini-case study discussions will now see how these concepts, relationships and thought processes manifest within the contemporary war in Ukraine.

Case Study 1. Collective Digital Defence Networks in Kharkiv and Dnipro

The collective nature of resilience is particularly visible in youth-led cyber defence clusters that formed in Kharkiv and Dnipro after the escalation of the full-scale invasion.¹⁰⁷ Before the war, both cities hosted active IT and university-based tech communities engaged in hackathons, open-source development and informal peer learning.¹⁰⁸ When wartime disruptions affected civic infrastructures, these networks reassembled into

volunteer cyber defence teams. This demonstrates that resilience does not emerge spontaneously but draws on existing relational ecosystems that can be repurposed under pressure.¹⁰⁹

These clusters operate through decentralised coordination. Roles are assigned through closed communication channels based on trust and demonstrated competence rather than formal authority.¹¹⁰ Participation is anchored in relational accountability: individuals contribute because they are recognised by others and because their work has immediate civic relevance.¹¹¹ The absence of hierarchical command increases responsiveness and adaptability, enabling teams to scale, fragment or redirect their work as needs change. Cluster activities include cybersecurity assistance, information verification, public communication support and digital literacy outreach. Leadership is enacted not through rank but through technical stewardship, sustaining the digital infrastructures that enable civic life to continue.¹¹² This form of leadership aligns with broader wartime shifts toward horizontal, collaborative agency.

Importantly, these clusters also cultivate emotional resilience. Regular shared work, mutual support and small affirmations of progress provide stability amid uncertainty. Working together becomes a means of restoring a sense of continuity and anchoring identity in collective purpose. This case demonstrates that resilience among young Ukrainians is not defined by individual endurance but by distributed competence,

¹⁰⁴ Boin, A. and van Eeten, M.J. (2013) 'The Resilient Organization', *Public Management Review*, 15(3), pp. 429–445. doi:10.1080/14719037.2013.769856; Berkes, F. and Ross, H. (2013) 'Community resilience: Toward an integrated approach', *Society & Natural Resources*, 26(1), pp. 5–20. doi:10.1080/08941920.2012.736605.

¹⁰⁵ Southwick, S.M. et al. (2014) 'Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: Interdisciplinary perspectives', *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5(1). doi:10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338; Tedeschi, R.G. and Calhoun, L.G. (2004) 'Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence', *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), pp. 1–18. doi:10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01

¹⁰⁶ Masten, A.S. (2001) 'Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development.', *American Psychologist*, 56(3), pp. 227–238. doi:10.1037//0003-066x.56.3.227; Luthar, S.S., Cicchetti, D. and Becker, B. (2000) 'The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work', *Child Development*, 71(3), pp. 543–562. doi:10.1111/1467-8624.00164

¹⁰⁷ Kazantsev, D. (2024) *It clusters in Ukraine: How the community lives during the War*, *Межа*. Available at:

<https://mezha.ua/en/articles/it-clusters-in-ukraine-how-the-community-lives-during-the-war/> (Accessed: 13 November 2025).

¹⁰⁸ Solovei, A. (2022) *Ukraine Tech Industry 2022: Market overview*, Ardas Group Software Development. Available at: <https://ardas-it.com/ukraine-tech-industry-2022-market-overview> (Accessed: 13 November 2025).

¹⁰⁹ Armanios, D., Christensen, J.S. and Tymoshenko, A. (2023) 'What Ukraine can teach the world about resilience and Civil Engineering', *Issues in Science and Technology*, 40(1), pp. 98–103. doi:10.58875/urye3161.

¹¹⁰ Kovalchuk, N. and Soesanto, S. (2024) 'The Ukrainian Way of Digital Warfighting', *Center for Security Studies (CSS)*, pp. 1–56. doi:10.3929/ethz-b-000685245.

¹¹¹ *Ukraine's case: Building Cyber Resilience Under fire* (2025) EGA. Available at: <https://ega.ee/ukraines-case-building-cyber-resilience-under-fire/> (Accessed: 28 November 2025).

¹¹² Kovalchuk, N. and Soesanto, S. (2022) 'Cyberdefense Report: The IT Army of Ukraine', *Center for Security Studies (CSS)*, pp. 1–32. doi:10.3929/ethz-b-000552293.

trust-based coordination, and emotionally sustaining community ties.

4.2 Empowerment as Identity Reconstruction and Public Voice

While resilience preserves coherence of purpose during disruption, empowerment speaks to the process through which young leaders reassert agency, redefine identity and claim legitimacy in public life. Empowerment in wartime Ukraine does not primarily manifest as formal authority, but as the capacity to speak, to act and to be recognised as a subject shaping the future.¹¹³

The war has interrupted expected life trajectories. Careers, relationships and plans have been deferred or transformed. Empowerment thus involves rebuilding identity in response to new responsibilities, risks and social expectations. It develops through collective environments in which shared narratives, validation, and mutual recognition allow individuals to reinterpret their experiences meaningfully.¹¹⁴ As one participant shared, “I work through the stress, cry when I need to, go to the gym, and remind myself that no one will take control of my life for me – I must do it myself,” showing how empowerment emerges through emotional processing and the active reclaiming of self-direction.¹¹⁵ Voice and visibility are central. Empowerment is enacted when young people articulate their experiences, when their contributions are acknowledged and when they participate in shaping public narratives about national survival and reconstruction. Empowerment is therefore relational and situated, emerging through

participation in communities that affirm responsibility and capability.¹¹⁶

Empowerment is also ongoing rather than linear. It involves navigating vulnerability and determination, personal emotion and public role. It is not achieved once; it is maintained through practice.¹¹⁷ This dynamic is exemplified by the women’s veteran’s movement discussed below.

Case Study 2. Empowerment Through Collective Identity: “Veteranka” / Women’s Veterans Movement

The women’s veterans movement “Veteranka” illustrates empowerment as identity reconstruction anchored in collective recognition. The organisation emerged as women who served in the Armed Forces and volunteer battalions encountered challenges reintegrating into civilian life, where military leadership was often assumed to be a male domain.¹¹⁸

“Veteranka” addresses these challenges by creating public platforms where women veterans articulate their experiences, claim authority and reshape collective understandings of who is recognised as a defender and community leader.¹¹⁹ Activities include advocacy for veterans’ rights, peer-led psychological support, leadership training and public campaigns normalising women’s presence in defence and civic decision-making. The organisation’s decentralised structure reinforces empowerment as relational. Leadership is distributed, enabling members to assume roles based on capacity and confidence rather than hierarchy. Authority is

¹¹³ Cornwall, A. and Brock, K. (2005) ‘What do buzzwords do for development policy? A critical look at “participation”, “empowerment” and “poverty reduction”’, *Third World Quarterly*, 26(7), pp. 1043–1060.

doi:10.1080/01436590500235603; Kabeer, N. (1999) ‘Resources, Agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of Women’s empowerment’, *Development and Change*, 30(3), pp. 435–464. doi:10.1111/1467-7660.00125.

¹¹⁴ Hammack, P.L. (2010) *Narrative and the politics of identity* [Preprint]. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195394467.001.0001; McAdams, D.P. and McLean, K.C. (2013) ‘Narrative identity’, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(3), pp. 233–238. doi:10.1177/0963721413475622

¹¹⁵ Interview 5

¹¹⁶ Drury, J., Cocking, C. and Reicher, S. (2009) ‘Everyone for themselves? A comparative study of crowd solidarity among emergency survivors’, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 48(3), pp. 487–506. doi:10.1348/014466608x357893; Lundy, L. (2007) ‘“voice” is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child’,

British Educational Research Journal, 33(6), pp. 927–942.

doi:10.1080/01411920701657033; Gaventa, J. (2006) ‘Finding the spaces for change: A power analysis’, *IDS Bulletin*, 37(6), pp. 23–33. doi:10.1111/j.1759-5436.2006.tb00320.x.

¹¹⁷ Christens, B.D. (2011) ‘Toward relational empowerment’, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 50(1–2), pp. 114–128. doi:10.1007/s10464-011-9483-5; Perkins, D.D. and Zimmerman, M.A. (1995) ‘Empowerment theory, research, and application’, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), pp. 569–579. doi:10.1007/bf02506982; Zimmerman, M.A. (1995) ‘Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations’, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), pp. 581–599. doi:10.1007/bf02506983

¹¹⁸ The Women Veterans Movement (no date) NGO UKRAINIAN WOMEN VETERAN MOVEMENT. Available at: <https://uwvm.org.ua/en/> (Accessed: 28 November 2025).

¹¹⁹ Martsenyuk, T., Ganna Grytsenko, G. and Kvit, A. (2016) ‘The “invisible battalion”: Women in ato military operations in Ukraine’, *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal*, 0(2), pp. 171–187. doi:10.18523/kmlpj88192.2016-2.171-187.

grounded in shared experience, countering narrowly defined models of expertise.¹²⁰

Regional variation further shapes how empowerment is enacted. In large cities, the organisation collaborates with universities, cultural institutions and international partners, making advocacy more visible. In smaller or frontline regions, its work centres on informal community support and psychological reintegration. Empowerment, therefore, is embedded in specific social and material environments. By reframing leadership to include emotional resilience, community repair and social restoration, “Veteranka” challenges conventional models of authority and expands public narratives of who shapes Ukraine’s future.

These two mini-case studies show that resilience and empowerment among young Ukrainians are mutually reinforcing. Resilience sustains participation by providing emotional and structural continuity, while empowerment shapes the meaning and direction of that participation. Leadership arises not from formal hierarchies but from relational belonging and shared purpose. This section has demonstrated that resilience in wartime Ukraine is collective, rooted in horizontal networks and shared identity, and that empowerment is enacted through public voice and narrative redefinition. These findings provide the foundation for examining how such leadership practices can be sustained in post-war reconstruction, which the next section explores.

5. FROM CRISIS TO CONTINUITY: LEADERSHIP IN POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION

Having showcased some key aspect of life and leadership experiences of young people in Ukraine, the below moves the discussion to imagining how a post-conflict environment may utilise lessons learned for a more progressive future. It is necessarily broadly speculative (at the time of writing the conflict remains very much ongoing), but it applies the lessons learned from the above empirical analysis and the authors lived experiences in relation to what the literature suggests are important aspects of post-conflict societies.

¹²⁰ UN Women (2025), “Ukraine War: Women Are on the Front Lines and Leading Recovery,” UN Women, March 8, <https://open.unwomen.org/en/story/ukraine-war-women-are-front-lines-and-leading-recovery> (Accessed 20 November 2025); Royal United Services Institute (2023). “Veteranka: Supporting Ukraine’s Female Defenders.” RUSI Commentary, July 21, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/veteranka-supporting-ukraines-female-defenders> (Accessed 20 November 2025)..

5.1 Reframing Leadership Beyond Wartime Conditions

The forms of youth leadership that emerged under wartime conditions do not simply recede when the immediate crisis subsides. Instead, they constitute a foundation for post-war civic participation, institutional rebuilding, and community governance.¹²¹ Previous sections demonstrated that young leaders acted through relational resilience, shared purpose, and adaptive coordination rather than formal authority or hierarchical command. These characteristics suggest a shift in how leadership is conceptualised: from an individualised role to a socially embedded practice that can inform long-term reconstruction.

During the war, young people assumed responsibilities outside formal assignments, often stepping into roles vacated by weakened institutions. Their agency developed in settings where institutional infrastructures were weakened, and action was driven by necessity, solidarity, and identity. Leadership, therefore, became a practice of sustaining continuity: preserving social life, communication, mutual care, and civic function amid disruption. These experiences cultivated leadership orientations grounded in responsiveness, horizontal collaboration, and peer-based problem-solving.¹²² One interview response captured this well, emphasising that “people want to see a leader now – someone strong, intelligent and resilient – and if you combine these qualities, you can go far and earn recognition in society.”¹²³ In the reconstruction phase, such orientations can translate into strategic community leadership capable of linking state structures, civil society, and grassroots initiatives.

To serve as a foundation for reconstruction, however, wartime leadership must be transformed from a short-term adaptive effort into a stable civic capacity. Emotional and symbolic motivations, such as loyalty to community and commitment to national recovery, can support enduring civic engagement. Yet this continuity is not automatic. It requires mechanisms that enable skill consolidation, psychological reintegration, and

¹²¹ Berkes, F. and Ross, H. (2013) ‘Community resilience: Toward an integrated approach’, *Society & Natural Resources*, 26(1), pp. 5–20. doi:10.1080/08941920.2012.736605.

¹²² Grey, J., Brett, R. and Specht, I. (2005) ‘Young soldiers: Why they choose to fight’, *International Journal*, 60(4). doi:10.2307/40204117.

¹²³ Interview 5

meaningful involvement in decision-making processes.¹²⁴

The transition to post-war leadership must also account for the diversity of wartime experiences. Displacement, service, loss, and reconfigured social networks will lead to different pathways of re-engagement. Some young leaders may enter political institutions, others may lead within cultural, professional, or advocacy environments. Ensuring continuity requires recognising multiple forms of leadership rather than privileging those that align with traditional political authority.

Reconstruction is therefore material and narrative. Leadership must contribute to rebuilding physical infrastructure and institutional systems, but also to restoring a collective sense of direction.¹²⁵ Wartime participation has produced new forms of civic subjectivity grounded in the belief that national recovery is a shared project, not solely the responsibility of the state. Translating wartime practices into post-war governance means shifting from reactive coordination to proactive institutional development.

5.2 Institutional and Community-Level Continuity Mechanisms

Sustaining youth leadership beyond wartime depends on creating structures that support collective and identity-based agency.¹²⁶ The adaptive practices that enabled leadership during crisis must be incorporated into post-war institutional environments. Without such integration, wartime leadership risks remaining temporary and dissolving once emergency conditions abate. A primary challenge is the disjunction between wartime leadership norms and pre-war institutional cultures. Many public institutions operate through hierarchical decision-making and procedural rigidity, while youth-led wartime initiatives relied on decentralised collaboration and context-driven problem-solving. If institutions return to conventional

hierarchies, they risk marginalising actors who possess critical experience and local knowledge.¹²⁷ This tension was reflected in one interview where a participant remarked that “older generations often do not take young leaders seriously or give them space to be heard,” underscoring the systemic barriers that can undermine continuity.¹²⁸

Continuity requires institutional flexibility: the capacity to acknowledge and integrate practices that emerged informally during the war.¹²⁹ This may include incorporating volunteer networks into municipal planning,¹³⁰ aligning regional reconstruction strategies with community-level coordination practices, or recognising informal leadership roles within local governance. Integration should not simply formalise grassroots activity, but preserve the autonomy and trust that underpinned its effectiveness.

At the community level, continuity depends on sustaining the social networks that provided emotional resilience, knowledge exchange, and coordination. These networks represent durable civic ecosystems that can support reconstruction if they are resourced without being absorbed into bureaucratic structures. Continuity also requires accounting for psychological transition. Meaning-making and shared identity were central to empowerment during wartime, but the easing of crisis often brings emotional disorientation. Reintegration can involve delayed fatigue, grief, or loss of purpose. Mental health support, peer-dialogue formats, and collective reflection spaces must therefore be treated as components of reconstruction rather than as secondary social services.

Sustaining leadership benefits from intergenerational and cross-sectoral linkages. Wartime leadership often intersected with civil society, municipal governance, and professional associations. Strengthening collaboration across these spheres can enable youth-led

¹²⁴ Masten, A.S. (2001) ‘Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development’, *American Psychologist*, 56(3), pp. 227–238. doi:10.1037/0003-066x.56.3.227.

¹²⁵ Svitková, K. (2015) ‘Resilience: The governance of complexity’, *Forum for Development Studies*, 42(2), pp. 379–381. doi:10.1080/08039410.2015.1041438.

¹²⁶ Evans, S.D. and Prilleltensky, I. (2007) ‘Youth and democracy: Participation for personal, Relational, and collective well-being’, *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35(6), pp. 681–692. doi:10.1002/jcop.20172.

¹²⁷ Batryn, N. (2023) ‘Wartime leadership in the context of organizational change theories’, *International Science Journal of*

Management, Economics & Finance, 2(1), pp. 96–103. doi:10.46299/j.isjmef.20230201.10.

¹²⁸ Interview 7

¹²⁹ Hilhorst, D., Desportes, I. and de Milliano, C.W.J. (2019) ‘Humanitarian governance and resilience building: Ethiopia in comparative perspective’, *Disasters*, 43(S2). doi:10.1111/disa.12332.

¹³⁰ Kun, K.E. et al. (2014) ‘Conceptualizing and measuring community preparedness within Public Health Preparedness and response’, *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, 20(4). doi:10.1097/phh.0b013e3182a5bbcc.

initiatives to scale while maintaining adaptability and contextual awareness.

5.3 Challenges and Risks to Leadership Continuity

The transition from wartime leadership to post-war civic capacity is vulnerable to several critical risks.¹³¹ First, hierarchical institutional norms may reassert themselves once the urgency of the crisis passes, a pattern frequently observed when post-conflict states return to centralised governance structures.¹³² If youth leaders are repositioned as subordinate implementers rather than co-creators of reconstruction strategies, their agency will be diminished, and valuable experiential knowledge may be lost.¹³³ This concern resonates with one interviewee who observed that “getting heard by older members of leadership is extremely difficult, and recognition often depends on age rather than contribution,”¹³⁴ highlighting how generational hierarchies can undermine continuity. Second, inequalities in access to resources and visibility are likely to intensify during reconstruction. Research shows that urban-rural and centre-periphery divides tend to widen in post-conflict transitions.¹³⁵ Leaders situated in large cities or connected to international networks may gain influence, while those in rural, frontline, or displaced communities risk marginalisation, reflecting long-standing patterns of uneven development.¹³⁶ This can result in symbolic representation without substantive redistribution of capacity, a well-documented outcome of participatory

governance initiatives that lack structural support. Third, psychological strain poses a threat to continuity.¹³⁷ Wartime leadership required sustained emotional labour, and the transition to post-war life may destabilise the narrative frameworks that enabled coping, particularly when meaning-making structures collapse after crisis.¹³⁸ Without collective spaces for integrating wartime experience, agency may collapse into private exhaustion, consistent with findings on post-conflict identity disorientation.¹³⁹

Reconstruction may prioritise centralisation, economic acceleration, or geopolitical alignment in ways that sideline participatory governance, a dynamic described in studies of post-war state-building.¹⁴⁰ If young leaders are framed as mobilisable volunteers rather than strategic partners, disillusionment and withdrawal may follow, threatening long-term democratic resilience. These risks indicate that leadership continuity requires political commitment and institutional openness, consistent with work on inclusive governance and civic trust¹⁴¹. Without deliberate support, the socially grounded forms of leadership cultivated during the war may dissipate or be replaced by technocratic or elite-driven models, a common trajectory in post-conflict institutional reconstruction.¹⁴²

5.4 Sustaining Youth Leadership Beyond Wartime

Sustaining youth leadership after the war is therefore a structural challenge.¹⁴³ It requires transforming

¹³¹ Hampson, F.O. and Lederach, J.P. (1998) ‘Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies’, *International Journal*, 53(4). doi:10.2307/40203740.

¹³² Chandler, D. (2006) *Empire in denial: The politics of state-building*. London: Pluto.

¹³³ Cornwall, A. and Coelho, V.S.P. (2007) *Spaces for change?: The politics of citizen participation in New Democratic Arenas*. London, NY: Zed Books : Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan.

¹³⁴ Interview 7

¹³⁵ Goodhand, J. (2003) ‘Enduring disorder and persistent poverty: A review of the linkages between war and chronic poverty’, *World Development*, 31(3), pp. 629–646. doi:10.1016/s0305-750x(03)00009-3.

¹³⁶ Mac Ginty, R. (2011) ‘International peacebuilding and local resistance’, *Palgrave Macmillan* [Preprint]. doi:10.1057/9780230307032.

¹³⁷ Mansuri, G. and Rao, V. (2014) ‘Localizing development: Does participation work?’, *Journal of Economics*, 112(2), pp. 201–205. doi:10.1007/s00712-014-0394-4.

¹³⁸ Tedeschi, R.G. and Calhoun, L.G. (2004) ‘Oosttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence’,

Psychological Inquiry, 15(1), pp. 1–18.

doi:10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01.

¹³⁹ Jordans, M.J., Pigott, H. and Tol, W.A. (2016)

‘Interventions for children affected by armed conflict: A systematic review of mental health and psychosocial support in low- and middle-income countries’, *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 18(1), pp. 1–14. doi:10.1007/s11920-015-0648-z.

¹⁴⁰ Paris, R. (2010) *The dilemmas of statebuilding: Confronting the contradictions of postwar peace operations*. London: Routledge.

¹⁴¹ Ansell, C. and Gash, A. (2007) ‘Collaborative governance in theory and Practice’, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(4), pp. 543–571.

doi:10.1093/jopart/mum032.

¹⁴² Andrews, M., Pritchett, L. and Woolcock, M. (2017)

‘Looking like a State: The seduction of isomorphic mimicry’, *Building State Capability*, pp. 29–52.

doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198747482.003.0003.

¹⁴³ Hampson, F.O. and Lederach, J.P. (1998) ‘Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies’, *International Journal*, 53(4). doi:10.2307/40203740.

governance frameworks rather than expecting individuals to persist through personal resilience alone, a point emphasised in research showing that resilience without institutional support leads to burnout and diminished civic capacity.¹⁴⁴

One pathway involves institutional flexibility: enabling distributed decision-making and recognising experiential expertise rather than equating leadership with seniority.¹⁴⁵ A second pathway involves equitable resource distribution, as reconstruction processes often reproduce or deepen inequalities unless explicitly designed to counteract them.¹⁴⁶ Reconstruction must support community-based leadership beyond metropolitan or internationally networked actors, reflecting evidence that peripheral and rural communities are frequently marginalised during post-conflict recovery.¹⁴⁷ A third pathway requires treating emotional and psychological recovery as civic infrastructure. Studies show that leadership capacity is sustained when experiences of conflict are acknowledged and processed collectively.¹⁴⁸ The capacity to lead is maintained when experiences are acknowledged and shared, rather than privatised or suppressed, aligning with findings on post-conflict meaning-making and trauma reintegration.¹⁴⁹ As reflected in one interview comment, “support from friends and family is what keeps me going,” indicating how emotional grounding is an essential component of sustaining agency even outside crisis conditions.¹⁵⁰

Finally, sustaining youth leadership depends on maintaining participatory reconstruction processes, as participatory governance strengthens legitimacy and long-term civic engagement.¹⁵¹ If post-war governance becomes centralised and elite-driven, leadership may shift from practice to performance, a pattern documented in post-conflict state-building critiques. Ultimately, the continuation of youth leadership will depend on whether post-war reconstruction supports plural, community-rooted forms of agency or replaces them with centralised, efficiency-oriented governance, reflecting broader concerns about technocratic dominance in reconstruction agendas.¹⁵² The development of inclusive and adaptive civic infrastructures will determine whether the leadership practices formed during wartime become enduring features of Ukraine’s democratic future, consistent with theories of long-term peacebuilding and civic transformation.¹⁵³

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how the full-scale Russian invasion has reshaped the leadership trajectories, identities, and capacities of young Ukrainians. Through an integrated analysis of qualitative interviews and scholarly literature, the research demonstrates that youth leadership in wartime Ukraine emerges not from formal authority but from relational resilience, shared purpose, and adaptive collaboration. Young people have assumed responsibilities across civic, digital,

¹⁴⁴ Evans, S.D. and Prilleltensky, I. (2007) ‘Youth and democracy: Participation for personal, Relational, and collective well-being’, *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35(6), pp. 681–692. doi:10.1002/jinterviewcop.20172; Masten, A.S. (2001) ‘Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development.’, *American Psychologist*, 56(3), pp. 227–238. doi:10.1037//0003-066x.56.3.227

¹⁴⁵ Ospina, S.M. and Foldy, E.G. (2016) ‘Collective dimensions of leadership’, *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*, pp. 1–6. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_2202-1; Cornwall, A. (2008) ‘Unpacking “participation”: Models, meanings and practices’, *Community Development Journal*, 43(3), pp. 269–283. doi:10.1093/cdj/bsn010.

¹⁴⁶ Mansuri, G. and Rao, V. (2014) ‘Localizing development: Does participation work?’, *Journal of Economics*, 112(2), pp. 201–205. doi:10.1007/s00712-014-0394-4.

¹⁴⁷ Goodhand, J. (2003) ‘Enduring disorder and persistent poverty: A review of the linkages between war and chronic poverty’, *World Development*, 31(3), pp. 629–646. doi:10.1016/s0305-750x(03)00009-3.

¹⁴⁸ Tedeschi, R.G. and Calhoun, L.G. (2004) ‘Oosttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence’, *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), pp. 1–18. doi:10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01.

¹⁴⁹ Jordans, M.J., Pigott, H. and Tol, W.A. (2016) ‘Interventions for children affected by armed conflict: A systematic review of mental health and psychosocial support in low- and middle-income countries’, *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 18(1), pp. 1–14. doi:10.1007/s11920-015-0648-z.

¹⁵⁰ Interview 2

¹⁵¹ Ansell, C. and Gash, A. (2007) ‘Collaborative governance in theory and Practice’, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(4), pp. 543–571. doi:10.1093/jopart/mum032.

¹⁵² Andrews, M., Pritchett, L. and Woolcock, M. (2017) ‘Looking like a State: The seduction of isomorphic mimicry’, *Building State Capability*, pp. 29–52. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198747482.003.0003.

¹⁵³ Hampson, F.O. and Lederach, J.P. (1998) ‘Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies’, *International Journal*, 53(4). doi:10.2307/40203740.

cultural, and community spheres, frequently compensating for institutional gaps through flexible, horizontally organised forms of collective action. These practices signify a broader shift in the social meaning of leadership - from hierarchical, position-based models toward context-responsive and community-rooted agency.

Three interconnected findings are central. First, wartime leadership is shaped by structural disruption and psychological strain, which alter daily routines, future expectations, and emotional functioning. At the same time, these pressures catalyse forms of resilience grounded in identity, moral responsibility, and mutual support. Second, young leaders demonstrate emergent forms of empowerment, reconstructing their sense of purpose and capability through meaningful contribution, peer recognition, and public voice. Leadership becomes a process of sustaining continuity amid instability rather than a fixed role or status. Third, both resilience and empowerment operate collectively. They are embedded in networks that provide emotional anchoring, knowledge exchange, and practical coordination. These networks are essential to how young people navigate uncertainty and maintain agency.

The study also identifies significant challenges to sustaining youth leadership beyond wartime conditions. Without institutional flexibility, recognition of experiential expertise, equitable resource distribution, and investment in psychological recovery, the civic capacities developed during the war may dissipate. Post-war reconstruction must therefore integrate youth-led practices into governance frameworks rather than relegating them to temporary crisis responses. Ensuring continuity requires creating enabling environments in which diverse forms of leadership - civic, digital, cultural, and community-based - can persist, evolve, and influence decision-making.

Ultimately, the findings contribute to broader debates on leadership in high-risk environments by illustrating how resilience and empowerment co-evolve under conditions of extreme disruption. The study also offers practical implications for policy: post-war reconstruction in Ukraine will depend not only on the rebuilding of physical infrastructure, but on the strengthening of relational, emotional, and community-based infrastructures that sustain youth agency. Whether the leadership practices developed by young Ukrainians during wartime become enduring features

of the country's democratic future will depend on the inclusivity, adaptability, and participatory character of the institutions that take shape during the reconstruction period.

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