

Resilience in Practice: Lessons from Ukraine and Georgia

In today's world, global and regional orders are under growing strain as international rules, norms, and frameworks are pressured by the interconnected conflicts from the Western Hemisphere to the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Sovereignty is no longer treated as self-enforcing, international law is increasingly contested, and even security guarantees once assumed to be stable now appear more politically conditional than many small states had hoped. In such an environment, deterrence, in its strongest form, remains concentrated in the hands of great powers, especially nuclear powers. For everyone else, survival depends less on abstract legal protections and more on the capacity to endure, adapt, and recover under pressure. Resilience, once treated largely as a broad and often over-theorized concept, is increasingly becoming a central strategic requirement for exposed states. Rather than adding yet another definition to an already crowded resilience debate, it may be more useful to examine what resilience looks like in practice. Ukraine and Georgia offer two sharply different

trajectories under prolonged pressure from the same revisionist power - Russia. One shows how sustained external pressure can consolidate national purpose, political will, and societal resistance. The other shows how similar pressure, when filtered through internal fragmentation, institutional weakness, and material constraints, can erode a state's ability to respond coherently. Analysis of the two cases can shed light on what resilience entails for vulnerable states when the surrounding security order no longer holds sway.

Russia's Strategic Attack on the Euro-Atlantic Security Order

Former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [recounts](#) that in autumn 2021, he sought to convene a session of the NATO Russia Council to explore, among other issues, geographically defined military limitations or buffer zones between NATO and Russia. He acknowledged that several allies, particularly those on NATO's eastern flank, strongly



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opposed such ideas because they would complicate the defense of their territories. Yet the initiative rested on the assumption that Moscow might again accept negotiated military constraints if the West were to consider meaningful concessions. According to Stoltenberg, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed the proposal as a “waste of time,” refusing to participate in discussions that would inevitably focus on Russia’s violations of international law in Ukraine, namely the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas.

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Despite conflicting interpretations and remaining ambiguities, this episode illustrates a deeper structural problem. Even as Russia sharply esca-

lated military pressure around Ukraine in late 2021, Western actors were still exclusively exploring formulas that only assumed the negotiability of the core principles underpinning the Euro-Atlantic security order. Among these was whether NATO members, particularly those on the eastern flank, could fully exercise membership rights, including hosting allied defensive capabilities on their territory. Russia, by contrast, approached the negotiations from a fundamentally different strategic position. When the NATO-Russia Council convened in January 2022, Moscow made clear that its [demands](#) were not a starting point for discussion but a non-negotiable ultimatum. Russian proposals were [described](#) as “not a menu from which one could pick suitable items,” but rather a take-it-or-leave-it offer. While parts of the Western policy community were still searching for compromises to stabilize relations, Russia was already pursuing a maximalist revisionist [agenda](#) aimed at dismantling the post-Cold War security architecture.

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weakness and concessions. For Russia, compromise is not a stabilizing mechanism but an indicator of weakness and an opportunity to press further. Misjudging what provokes Russian aggression and what restrains it has been a recurring blind spot in Western policy since the end of the Cold War. The pattern was already visible after Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, when the international response proved insufficient to alter Moscow's strategic calculus. Instead of reinforcing the principles of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, the limited consequences helped convince the Kremlin that revisionism could proceed at manageable cost. In this sense, the war against Ukraine represents the culmination of a longer trajectory in which Russia has steadily pursued its objective of dismantling a Western-dominated security system that it has [rejected](#) since its inception.

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Ukraine's Case: Consolidation of Civic Identity and Societal Mobilization

Ukraine's resilience was not an immediate reaction to the 2022 invasion but the result of a transformation that began with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014. Over the following years, Ukrainian society consolidated a civic identity centered on freedom, democracy, and aspirations for European integration. Shared determination, collective memory, and the vision of a European future increasingly replaced regional, linguistic, or ethnic markers as the primary foundations of national identity.

Based on the 2026 [study](#) on the correlation between identity and resilience in Ukraine, at the core of its national resilience were four main societal components. First was patriotism, understood as the willingness to contribute to the country. This was already the strongest resilience component before 2022, but by 2022 it surged further, with 80% of respondents rating it at the highest level. Second was social unity or solidarity, which also rose sharply under pressure. Third was trust in public institutions, which moved from moderate importance before 2022 to much higher significance during full-scale war. Fourth was trust in government and political leaders, which had been the weakest component before 2022 but improved notably during the invasion. Together, these four elements formed the social backbone of wartime resilience.

Several reinforcing factors contributed to this transformation. Civic identity became a powerful unifying force. Shared determination, democratic values, and European orientation provided a common framework through which the war was perceived as a struggle for political freedom and national survival. Social cohesion and patriotism intensified under external pressure, as solidarity, national unity, and willingness to sacrifice increased significantly with the escalation of Russian aggression.

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Institutional trust also strengthened. While confidence in government had previously been problematic, the experience of war and visible coordination between national and regional levels [increased](#) trust in political leadership and state institutions, especially the president and armed forces. At the same time, psychological and

cognitive factors proved decisive. Rising threat awareness, combined with morale, hope, and the will to fight, converted identity and solidarity into practical resistance. Ukrainian society became more resilient not because it felt secure, but because the perception of danger was clearly recognized and collectively interpreted as an existential challenge.

These dynamics created a reinforcing feedback loop between identity and resilience. Identity strengthened collective determination, while a successful collective experience of resistance further deepened national identity. The survival instinct, activated in response to the full-scale invasion in 2022, mobilized this accumulated societal capacity and transformed it into mass mobilization, while international support facilitated the tools for protracted defense arrangements. The main body of [knowledge](#) on resilience in defense and security, as well as NATO's core [approach](#), clearly underscores that one indispensable component of resilience-building is preparedness and advanced planning.

Ukraine's case is a practical proof of this. Its remarkable performance in 2022 was rooted in a significantly higher level of preparedness developed over the preceding years. Preparedness emerged as a central driver of resilience, alongside will to fight, morale, and a clear sense of danger. This preparedness was [facilitated](#) to a large extent by sustained international support from 2014 to 2022, which strengthened Ukraine's defense capabilities and societal awareness.

The materials in the [study](#) quoted above show that resilience grew as danger was clearly recognized, collectively interpreted, and translated into action. By 2022, will to fight, morale, and especially preparedness were all markedly stronger than before, demonstrating that Ukraine's resilience was practical and mobilizational, and strongly enabled by external support.

Georgia's Case: Institutional Vulnerability and Cognitive Pressure

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Georgia's trajectory since 2008 followed a markedly different [path](#). While Georgian society broadly maintained pro-Western orientations and democratic aspirations, democratic resilience gradually collapsed under sustained Russian influence operations. Political developments, including the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies, [state capture](#) dynamics, and oligarchic influence, degraded the ability of state institutions to act as barriers against external [pressure](#). Instead, elements of the political system became channels through which external influence could penetrate the state.

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insufficient and inconsistent [support](#) from Western partners, contributed to the gradual consolidation of a Russian-style authoritarian governing model. This trajectory culminated in a de facto state capture by the ruling party, Georgian Dream, which extended its control over key sources of power, including political institutions, media space, and economic levers. As a result, the strong pro-democracy and pro-Western orientation of society did not translate into policy outcomes or national resilience. Instead, a widening gap emerged between public preferences and state behavior, as the concentration of power constrained the ability of civil society and public opinion to influence decision-making. These dynamics generated structural vulnerabilities within the national resilience system, particularly by weakening accountability mechanisms, distorting information space, and limiting institutional responsiveness to societal demands.

In Georgia's case, the cognitive domain emerged as the decisive battlefield shaping the country's overall resilience. [Coordinated](#) anti-Western narratives originating from the Kremlin were actively amplified and localized by the Georgian Dream, embedding them into domestic political discourse. Among the most consequential were war-related narratives portraying closer alignment with the West, or a change in political leadership, as likely to trigger a spillover of the war in Ukraine into Georgia. These messages deliberately exploited societal trauma from the 2008 war and cultivated fear as a political instrument.

As a result, a society that remained overwhelmingly pro-Western became deeply polarized and unable to consolidate around common national interests. Persistent disinformation and psychological operations blurred the line between fact and manipulation. Authoritarian consolidation eroded trust in institutions and further fragmented public space. This was reinforced by structural enablers: economic [dependence](#) on Russia through trade, tourism, and remittances; political influence exercised via elite

networks and informal governance channels; and the influx of Russian citizens following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which added both economic leverage and social pressure points, particularly in urban centers like Tbilisi and Batumi.

At the same time, ambiguous and inconsistent international signaling and inaction regarding Georgia's democratic backsliding further deepened uncertainty. In this volatile environment, internal polarization intensified, institutions weakened, and dissenting voices were increasingly repressed. The cumulative effect was a collapse of the national resilience: despite strong pro-democratic and pro-Western attitudes at the societal level, confusion, fear, and narrative manipulation prevented collective action and undermined the translation of public will into policy. External influence proved most effective through this interaction between political leadership and the information environment, rather than through direct military means; although the occupation of Georgia's territories and aggressive political and economic pressure played a significant role in preparing the ground for cognitive warfare.

National Resilience in an International Context

Developments at the international and national levels of resilience are tightly interdependent. For small states in particular, national resilience is not only a product of internal cohesion or institutional capacity; it is also shaped by the credibility of the international system, including its rules and norms, and by the consistency of external support. When that credibility is undermined or signals of weakness are perceived, authoritarian and revisionist actors gain confidence to act. "The nuclear weapon of small states is international law," as [noted](#) by the late Estonian President Lennart Meri during the post-Soviet turbulences.

The trajectories of Ukraine and Georgia illustrate this dynamic with clarity. In Ukraine's case, strong, unequivocal political support and sustained international material assistance, especially before and after 2022, significantly reinforced national resilience. It strengthened defense capabilities, bolstered institutional legitimacy, and enabled large-scale societal mobilization around a shared civic identity. At the same time, Russia's decision to launch a full-scale invasion points to the limits and weaknesses of the rules-based system. As Jens Stoltenberg has reflected, signals of insufficient deterrence and perceived lack of resolve from the international community contributed to Moscow's calculation that such aggression would be tolerated. In this sense, weaknesses in the international system created the permissive conditions for the invasion, while subsequent strong support helped Ukraine consolidate its resilience.

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Georgia's trajectory demonstrates a similar pattern over a longer timeframe. The limited and inconsistent international response to Russia's 2008 invasion failed to impose meaningful constraints on Moscow's behavior and failed to help Georgia strengthen its defenses in the face of continued Russian aggression. This not only weakened Georgia's external security environment but also contributed to a broader perception that violations of sovereignty would not be decisively challenged. These dynamics carried forward into Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. In Georgia itself, the delayed and insufficient support for its democratic and Western trajectory created space for Russia to expand its influence. Over time, this

facilitated the erosion of institutional resilience and enabled the consolidation of governance practices that aligned more closely with Russian interests.

These cases demonstrate that the resilience of small states is closely tied to the credibility and consistency of the international system. When external support is strong and sustained, it reinforces domestic capacity to resist and adapt. When it is weak, delayed, or inconsistent, it creates opportunities for authoritarian powers such as Russia to exploit vulnerabilities, shape internal trajectories, and undermine national resilience.

Resilience During Fragmented Hyperconnectivity

Russia has pushed the rules-based international system to its limits through open revisionism and the use of force, yet current geopolitical trends point to a broader and more systemic erosion of post-Cold War norms. The weakening of international law is no longer driven by a single actor. It reflects a wider pattern in which major powers increasingly justify the use of military force, or the threat of it, through expansive interpretations of national security. This trend is particularly dangerous because it lowers the threshold for coercion and normalizes exceptional behavior as routine state practice.

Recent developments across multiple regions illustrate this shift. In the Western Hemisphere, the United States [operation](#) to capture Nicolás Maduro in Caracas was [framed](#) as a law enforcement action against narcoterrorism, despite involving military force on sovereign territory. Similarly, expanding anti-narcotics operations have increasingly relied on military tools, including lethal force against suspected trafficking networks. These cases blur the boundary between law enforcement and armed conflict, creating a legal grey zone where the use of force is justified by security imperatives rather than constrained by established norms. In the Middle East, the approach taken by the United

States and Israel toward Iran reflects a similar logic. Threats targeting infrastructure, such as energy systems and transport networks, have been justified on the grounds of dual use and deterrence, even

as they raise serious [concerns](#) under the principles governing the conduct of hostilities.

The growing reliance on national security justifications for the use or threat of force represents a structural shift with far-reaching consequences. When states increasingly define security in expansive and unilateral terms, the distinction between defensive necessity and coercive pressure becomes blurred. This adds to the already existing precedents of Russia's revisionist policies and aggressive strategies in Ukraine and Georgia, further weakening the credibility of international rules and encouraging escalation across different regions.

This dynamic is reinforced by rising transatlantic tensions, which further destabilize the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Disagreements between the United States and its European allies over crisis management, multilateral coordination, and the interpretation of international obligations have become more pronounced. Episodes such as [threats](#) around potential control over Greenland have raised fundamental questions about respect for sovereignty even within the Alliance. At the same time, divergences over the handling of conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as disputes within international institutions, have weakened the cohesion that traditionally underpinned transatlantic security cooperation.

These developments are tightly interconnected with broader global conflicts. The war in Ukraine, conflict with Iran, and security operations in the Western Hemisphere are part of a single strategic environment shaped by major-power competition. Legal flexibility in one theatre influences behavior in another, while political and military actions generate ripple effects across regions. As a result, instability

is no longer contained but spreads across interconnected security spaces.

The cumulative effect is systemic atrophy of the post-Cold War order. International law remains formally intact, yet its application has become increasingly conditional and contested. Norms are interpreted selectively, institutions are under strain, and alliances face internal divisions. Under these conditions, global and regional security architectures are exposed to sustained pressure, and the overall stability of international dynamics becomes more fragile and unpredictable.

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The lessons from Georgia and Ukraine must therefore be interpreted within the broader transformation of the international system. If the erosion of international norms continues and global politics becomes increasingly defined by spheres of influence and hard power competition, the meaning of resilience for small countries may change fundamentally. In such an environment, smaller states may be forced to reassess the foundations of their security strategies. Value-based choices become more difficult for societies exposed to existential threats. This places countries like Ukraine and Georgia in an increasingly difficult position. Their long-term resilience might depend less on normative alignment with democratic partners and more on their ability to balance interests between larger powers in a fragmented international system.

The Ukrainian and Georgian cases, therefore, underscore that resilience in the information age is fundamentally shaped in the cognitive domain. Identity, collective memory, shared values, and the interpretation of external threats and perception of potential partnerships determine how societies respond to crises.

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Ignoring this reality carries significant risks. If states increasingly sleepwalk into a world defined primarily by hard power and spheres of influence while neglecting the cognitive and psychological foundations of resilience, they risk overlooking the main drivers of societal determinations in the digital era. In contemporary information societies, the struggle for resilience is fought not only through military power, economic leverage, or diplomacy, but also in the realm of perception, identity, and collective belief. Failing to recognize this dynamic will likely generate deeper tensions, instability, and persistent geopolitical friction ■