



Public choice and national defense: lessons for the Russian–Ukrainian war

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Abstract

This paper applies public choice theories of national defense to analyze key features of the Russian–Ukrainian war. A key aspect of Ukraine’s political reforms since 2014 has been strengthening the autonomy of local governments. Reforms to Ukraine’s defense system included both aspects of centralization—through the rapid assimilation of private defense organizations in 2014–15 and again in 2021–22—and decentralization, particularly through the creation of local military administrations after Russia’s full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022. The autonomy-enhancing local governance initiatives likely improved Ukraine’s crisis response capacity, while decentralizing aspects of the defense system appear to have bolstered territorial resilience. At the same time, decentralizing defense creates pressure on the autonomy of local governments and the centralizing aspects of defense sector reform raise concerns about declining individual rights and liberties. More broadly, the Russian–Ukrainian war illustrates how public choice theory can illuminate the complex institutional arrangements—both centralized and decentralized—that underpin the coproduction of national defense as a multifaceted public good.

Keywords Defense economics · Polycentricity · Decentralization · Ukraine · Russian–Ukrainian war

JEL Classification B52 · F52 · H11 · H12

1 Introduction

The Russian–Ukrainian war began with Russia’s annexation of Crimea and occupation of parts of Donbas in 2014. The war intensified dramatically when Russia’s full-scale invasion commenced on February 24, 2022. While Ukraine has largely managed to hold its territory, the human and economic toll has been immense. As of late 2024, Russia’s unprovoked aggression has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Ukrainian citizens and

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soldiers. Infrastructure damage from sustained air raids and shelling—particularly in contested eastern regions—has severely disrupted economic activity (Zhukov 2023).

We argue that public choice analysis provides critical insight into the political economy of national defense and helps explain Ukraine’s wartime resilience and institutional adaptation. In particular, we examine how the structure of political and defense institutions—ranging from centralized military coordination to decentralized local governance—has shaped Ukraine’s capacity to respond to invasion and sustain national resistance.

This paper adopts a broad conception of national defense as a multifaceted public good. Defense, in this view, encompasses not only the centralized production and deployment of military force but also essential elements such as societal resilience, citizen commitment, local institutional capacity, and the ability to adapt civil defense to diverse regional conditions. This contrasts with conventional public choice analysis of provision of military goods emphasizing issues of coordination, free-riding, and state capacity. While these concerns remain important, the experience of Ukraine underscores the need to analyze defense as a bundled set of goods—some material, some social, some institutional—that vary in their production requirements and governance needs. Rather than analyzing national defense from the perspectives of public or private provision, we treat it as a composite good that requires different governance structures for different components. Some aspects such as high-level military coordination benefit from centralization, while others—like mobilizing local knowledge, maintaining public services under fire, or fostering civilian buy-in—are better served through more decentralized, polycentric arrangements.

This public choice perspective on defense clarifies why political reforms—by which we mean changes to the structure of political authority, in particular the extent of power sharing and autonomy between different levels of government—are central to understanding national defense outcomes. Initiatives that enhance local autonomy, such as the creation and empowerment of hromadas—the lowest level units of municipal government in Ukraine—are not merely complementary to military efforts but integral to a broader conception of security. For instance, if effective defense depends in part on strong citizen engagement and responsiveness to local needs, then polycentric institutions provide the governance infrastructure to deliver these inputs. As Hirschman (1970) argued, mechanisms of “voice” can sustain commitment in times of crisis; in Ukraine, local governments have often filled gaps in state capacity, delivering public services and stabilizing communities under wartime conditions. Our analysis therefore focuses on how different institutional initiatives—some of which centralized state power, while others involved decentralization of authority and autonomy for local governments—interact in the production of defense as a public good.

We use this framework to interpret Ukraine’s success in defending against Russia. This requires integrating analysis of both political and defense sector reforms. On the political side, the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 initiated a process of decentralization that strengthened local autonomy, particularly through the empowerment of hromadas. These initiatives were largely implemented by 2020 and created a more polycentric governance structure, even though Ukraine remains a unitary rather than federal state. As studies of Ukraine’s wartime governance show, hromadas continued to deliver essential public services and maintain local order, even in occupied territories and under severe strain (Brik and Mur-tazashvili 2023; Keudel and Huss 2023, 2024, 2025; Arends et al. 2023; Shapoval et al. 2024; Rabinovych et al. 2023).

Defense system reforms reflected both monocentric and polycentric dynamics. In 2014–15 and again in 2021–22, Ukraine assimilated private and voluntary defense initiatives into formal military structures. Wood (2019, 2022) explains why and how Ukraine’s

volunteer battalions “crowdfunded” defense in 2014 in response to the inability of the government to maintain territorial integrity. National defense is a challenging case for the voluntary provision of public goods because the free rider problem is especially severe. This is because of the high costs of security and war-making, but more importantly, because it is nearly impossible to exclude individuals within a defended territory from enjoying its benefits, regardless of whether they contribute. Private provision of national defense did not end with the full-scale invasion in 2022; it continued in new forms, including volunteer frontline medics who initially relied on local donations before being integrated into the formal military apparatus and placed on government payrolls, as seen in cases like Crimea. While initially operating outside state control, these groups were later integrated into the Ukrainian National Guard and other official units. For instance, after the full-scale invasion, Azov Battalion, which emerged in response to Russia’s initial aggression in 2014, was authorized to use U.S.-supplied weapons in June 2024 despite Russian propaganda aimed at discrediting such groups. This pattern of private initiative followed by state assimilation was repeated in other areas, including with frontline medics and drone schools, which began as volunteer efforts and were subsequently institutionalized within the formal defense system. These cases highlight the logic of coproduction, where state and society jointly provide security in the face of crisis (Coyne and Goodman 2020).

Ukraine’s decentralization of defense also included the creation of local military administrations, especially after the declaration of martial law. While these entities were technically decentralized, they were vertically accountable to central authorities, often replacing or co-opting elected hromada officials. Further, martial law implemented by President Zelensky after the full-scale invasion included suspending democratic elections and relaxing transparency requirements. This arrangement enabled more rapid integration of civilian and military functions at the local level but also raised concerns about long-term implications for local autonomy. As Alshamy et al. (2024) suggest, Ukraine’s system of defense can be seen as polycentric, with overlapping roles for formal military units, civilian institutions, and grassroots organizations.

Political reforms likely contributed to more effective crisis response, while the combination of centralizing initiatives (especially integrating private militias) alongside decentralization (especially establishing local military administrations) enhanced Ukraine’s ability to hold on to its territory since Russia’s full-scale invasion. In this regard, there appears to be a complementarity with political and defense sector initiatives: autonomous hromada provided for more effective crisis response, while in some regions, “decentralizing defense” proved effective in defending territory against Russia. In this regard, well-designed political and defense sector reforms appear to be complementary to wartime objectives. This complementarity, along with the tradeoffs, follow from conceptualizing of national defense production as a multifaceted good.

At the same time, the initiatives establishing local government autonomy to at least some extent exhibit tradeoffs with decentralized defense reforms in some local jurisdictions, specifically those where hromada were essentially coopted into the defense system. A significant question for the future of Ukraine is whether the crisis cooptation of local government functions will lead to a return of local government autonomy or whether, as Higgs (1987) suggests, crises will undermine local autonomy.

By analyzing defense as a composite public good, this paper highlights the governance tradeoffs involved in organizing effective national defense under conditions of existential threat. In this regard, it complements previous public choice analysis of Ukraine’s war (Hebert and Krasnozhon 2024). Our analysis also complements previous research on Ukraine, which considers aspects such as how local agendas of key decision-makers

in eastern Ukraine, Russian responsiveness to secession, and opportunistic intervention shaped the war's origins (Arel and Driscoll 2023); how military commanders respond to rents and compete for positions in the security sector (Chinchilla and Driscoll 2021); and how prewar economic factors—such as local employment patterns and dependence on trade with Russia—intensified secessionist pressures (Zhukov 2019). This literature also investigates the role of recruitment dynamics in the insurgency (Kudelia 2019), the impact of perceived abandonment by Kyiv versus cultural or linguistic factors in shaping pro-Russian sentiment (Giuliano 2018), and Russia's use of “propaganda aggression” (Maiorova 2017). Public choice analysis offers a distinctive framework for understanding how institutional incentives, coordination challenges, and the balance between central authority and local autonomy shape the effectiveness of wartime defense in Ukraine.

2 Governance, national defense, and public choice

2.1 Collective action and the challenge of voluntary defense

Public choice theory begins with the core tension between voluntary action and collective need. Samuelson (1954) famously argued that public goods—such as national defense—are prone to underprovision in voluntary systems because individuals may misrepresent or understate their preferences to avoid paying. Tiebout (1956) did argue that decentralized governance can improve the efficiency of public goods provision. The question for Tiebout is not as much about the impossibility of market provision, but the ways in which decentralized governance could better align citizen preferences with production of public goods and services. Later, Oates (1972) provided further justification that a center-local arrangement of government can be Pareto-superior to a central government standing alone in financing public goods.

The standard solution is coercion via taxation and centralized budgeting. Yet this solution introduces new problems: who decides on the “optimal” level of provision, and how are incentives aligned to make that decision in the public interest? Subsequent scholarship has refined this problem. Rather than treating coercion as either always necessary or always avoidable, researchers have emphasized the conditions under which collective action can occur without it. Key parameters include group size, preference heterogeneity, monitoring costs, discount rates, and institutional design (Hirshleifer 2001; Dixit 2004). The presence or absence of third-party enforcement shapes what governance forms are feasible. In contexts without centralized coercion scholars have traced how institutional workarounds emerged to mitigate free-riding, shirking, or holdout behavior (Coase 1974; Friedman 1979, 1984; Benson 1990; Stringham 2015; Candela and Geloso 2018; Geloso and Leeson 2020), including the possibility of private provision of defense (Hummel and Lavoie 1990).

Although Samuelson's model emphasizes the financing of public goods, the broader debate concerns whether voluntary collective action can reliably produce public goods—particularly when coordinated behavior is essential, as in national defense. Defense provision requires more than financial contributions; it demands strategic alignment and collective action. When local units act autonomously, they may withhold participation or pursue conflicting goals. This represents a form of “underprovision” driven not by unwillingness to pay, but by divergent strategic preferences. Voluntary coordination may succeed in low-threat or high-trust environments, but under existential threat, the risks of local defection or

misalignment increase, each potentially justifying coercive centralization. These dilemmas are central to Ukraine's wartime governance choices, as discussed in Sect. 3.

2.2 Organizing authority: centralized command versus distributed autonomy

Governance structures vary in how they concentrate authority. Monocentric systems feature centralized command and control. A single unit makes binding decisions for the whole, even if it delegates specific responsibilities downward. Decentralization can occur in monocentric systems, but this autonomy is contingent—always subject to revision by the center (Eusepi and Wagner 2010).

Polycentric systems, by contrast, comprise multiple decision centers that operate with relative autonomy under shared rules (Ostrom et al. 1961; McGinnis and Ostrom 2012). The autonomy to make decisions independently of the center is what contrasts a monocentric with a polycentric system of governance (Wagner 2005). These systems allow for overlapping jurisdictions, competition among authorities, and experimentation. They tend to produce institutional diversity and may foster resilience by reducing the system's vulnerability to single points of failure (Wagner 2016). Polycentric systems also enable public entrepreneurship, the process involving generation of new policies and ideas (Aligica 2018).

The distinction between monocentric and polycentric systems is not absolute, and real-world governance often blends features of both. However, their implications differ. Monocentric systems offer the speed and coordination which are crucial for rapid crisis response but may be unresponsive to local needs. Polycentric systems offer adaptability, experimentation, and local tailoring, but may struggle with coordination, especially under urgent or high-stakes conditions. These tradeoffs are particularly salient for national defense, where both unity of command and local responsiveness can be essential. Note that under some circumstances, polycentric systems develop coordination as an emergent property. The extent to which this occurs depends on the institutional specifics. Therefore, the severity of the tradeoffs in question depends on the institutions and context.

2.3 Designing defense systems: public goods, coproduction, and institutional tradeoffs

In the domain of national defense, public goods theory has traditionally emphasized the free-rider problem. Because the benefits of security are non-excludable, individuals have incentives to under-contribute, leading to underprovision unless a central authority compels participation (Thompson 1974, 1979; Hickson and Thompson 1991; Coyne and Lucas 2016). This logic supports the state's monopoly over force and taxation. Another rationale is that public goods promote development, creating incentives to expand state capacity (Piano 2019). Related questions concern whether the state is "inevitable," given the difficulties of organizing defense without coercion and the threats posed by external rivals (Holcombe 2004; Leeson and Stringham 2005; Stringham 2006; Leeson 2007). Yet the state's coercive power also introduces risks of predation (Buchanan 1975), exacerbated by collective action problems in resisting such exploitation (Tullock 1971).

Despite the logic of centralization, the economics of anarchy offers a contrasting view, showing that under certain conditions, defense can be provided privately. Historical and empirical studies document cases in which non-state actors organized protection without centralized coercion (Leeson 2014; Piano 2017). In modern contexts,

Hudik and Chovanculiak (2018) demonstrate how crowdfunding enabled the formation of Ukraine's volunteer battalions after Russia's 2014 annexation and occupation—an example of decentralized, voluntary financing of public goods. These findings align with research on relational and reputation-based contracting, which explains how cooperation can be sustained in the absence of formal enforcement. This literature—originally developed to explain behavior within firms and other long-term economic relationships—relies on repeated interactions, informal governance, and incentive alignment (MacLeod and Malcomson 1989; Baker et al. 2002; Levin 2003; Mailath and Samuelson 2006).

Still, polycentric systems pose coordination risks in wartime. Autonomous units may delay action, withhold compliance, or follow divergent strategies—classic “holdout” or “shirking” problems. Similar to challenges in industrial organization, decentralized agents may pursue local objectives at the expense of system-wide goals unless incentives are aligned. In defense, such misalignment can be catastrophic. These coordination problems help explain why Ukraine has, at times, centralized control over volunteer battalions or subordinated hromadas to military authorities.

Much of the literature assumes defense is provided by the state. This raises classic public choice concerns: What strategies will political actors pursue, and how do these align with the public interest? A central question is whether defense is better organized through centralized or decentralized means.

The coproduction perspective clarifies how the provision of public goods, including defense, often requires joint input from both state institutions and citizens. Coproduction occurs when formal authorities and private individuals or associations jointly contribute labor, knowledge, or organizational capacity to produce a good (Ostrom 1996; Aligica and Tarko 2013; Rayamajhee and Paniagua 2021; Paniagua and Rayamajhee 2023). These contributions are shaped by the incentives created by governance structures. Federalism and local autonomy, for example, create opportunities for “consumer-producers” to tailor services to local preferences and knowledge (V. Ostrom 1994; Parks et al. 1981). In democratic systems, mechanisms such as foot voting and interjurisdictional competition can enhance the match between citizen needs and service provision (Epple and Zelenitz 1981).

These dynamics are relevant not only to education or infrastructure but to defense and civil protection as well. Polycentricity may strengthen defense by enabling institutional learning and redundancy, which Frey (2010) argues is a reason to see federalism as a source of institutional resilience of countries to attacks by terrorists. Though the optimal design of defense likely depends on what is known about the adversary and the nature of the threat (Bier et al. 2007), distributed systems may be better able to creatively to shocks, distribute burdens more equitably, and enhance legitimacy through citizen participation. Ukraine's post-2014 reforms exemplify both the promise and challenges of this model: while they expanded local capacity and citizen engagement, they also raised difficult questions about coherence and coordination in wartime.

Ukraine's drone schools offer a vivid illustration of how polycentric governance can foster bottom-up innovation in defense. Initially launched as private initiatives by civil society actors and technologists, these schools trained volunteers in drone manufacturing, navigation, and deployment. As their effectiveness became clear, the Ukrainian government formalized their role and provided institutional support. This private initiative was followed by state assimilation exemplifies how polycentric systems can generate creative, decentralized solutions that are later scaled through monocentric mechanisms. As Wood (2025) argues, this model helps explain Ukraine's comparative advantage in drone production over Russia—demonstrating how institutional diversity can enhance wartime effectiveness.

2.4 Aligning loyalty and capacity through resource-sharing institutions

Defense is not just about force—it also depends on allegiance. Citizens and communities must believe the system is worth defending and that their contributions matter. One way to secure such commitment is through resource sharing: allowing localities to retain or control a portion of resources in exchange for support. This approach can reinforce loyalty and deter defection, especially in contested or fragile areas.

Polycentric governance structures—with genuine local autonomy—facilitate this dynamic. When communities have voice, discretion, and a tangible stake, they are more likely to mobilize in defense of the broader system. This mechanism parallels insights from Hirschman (1970), who argues that voice and loyalty are mutually reinforcing when institutional exit is costly. In wartime, this logic plays out when hromadas support displaced populations, coordinate emergency services, or maintain public order, strengthening both the state's legitimacy and its defense capacity.

However, resource sharing is not exclusive to polycentric systems. A monocentric state can decentralize resources while retaining command authority. What matters is not just where resources are spent but who controls their use. Polycentricity is more than decentralization; it requires independent initiative and discretion. The challenge, then, is to balance local autonomy with national coherence, especially under crisis.

Ukraine's wartime experience highlights this tension. In some cases, resource-sharing and local autonomy facilitated effective local defense and service delivery. In others, the central government asserted direct control by overriding elected local officials through military administrations to ensure strategic alignment. Whether this improves or erodes long-term capacity depends on how postwar governance is restructured.

2.5 Institutional design for wartime governance and preservation of autonomy

This framework clarifies several analytical points. First, distinguishing between political reforms and defense system reforms is crucial. Political initiatives that enhance local autonomy may foster resilience, legitimacy, and crisis response, each of which are key components of defense in a broader sense. Defense system initiatives, by contrast, often emphasize coordination, control, and integration. The challenge is aligning these logics without undermining either.

Second, the severity and immediacy of external threats affect the feasibility of voluntary defense. While private provision may work under low-stakes or fragmented threat environments, existential conflicts create pressure for centralization and coercive integration. Ukraine's incorporation of volunteer battalions into the military hierarchy illustrates this shift—from voluntary mobilization to enforced coordination.

Third, the optimal degree of decentralization in defense provision remains context-dependent. Proximity to conflict zones may justify decentralizing operational control, even within a centralized structure. However, the tradeoffs—between responsiveness and coherence, initiative and alignment—must be explicitly managed.

Fourth, tensions arise when initiatives designed to enhance local autonomy conflict with the imperatives of centralized defense. Ukraine's reliance on local governments for wartime services coexists with emergency military governance that sometimes overrides them. Understanding these tradeoffs is essential for evaluating institutional resilience and reform.

Finally, although our focus is on governance of wartime crisis, the environment we examine shares important features with those studied in industrial organization. In particular, multiple autonomous actors—some public, some hybrid—interact strategically with centralized authorities attempting to coordinate a rapidly evolving ecosystem (Tirole 1988). Commercial interests are increasingly relevant in modern defense, from private security firms to weapons production and logistics.

We opt for a public choice and polycentric governance perspective due to our emphasis on non-commercial contributors to Ukraine's defense, especially local governments, volunteer organizations, and civil society. That said, we recognize that in contexts where market-oriented actors play a larger role, industrial organization provides a valuable analytical lens. Our aim here is to clarify the institutional dynamics of wartime coproduction, while inviting complementary frameworks where appropriate.

3 Governance and defense reform in Ukraine

3.1 Governance reform

The 2014 Revolution of Dignity initiated a period of sweeping political and governance reforms aimed at strengthening democratic accountability in Ukraine. Among the most significant initiatives was the decentralization of power to local governments, a response to long-standing concerns about centralized corruption and unresponsive state institutions.

This reform agenda emerged from a broader crisis triggered by President Viktor Yanukovich's 2013 rejection of the long-anticipated Association Agreement with the European Union in favor of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), whose governing commission is based in Moscow and where Russia dominates with 87% of the bloc's GDP. Yanukovich, who had previously served as governor of Donetsk Oblast, prime minister, and then president from 2010, had long cultivated ties with Moscow. He lost the election in 2004 but won the 2010 presidential election.¹ The Kuchma administration rigged the 2004 runoff presidential election results in favor of the incumbent prime minister, Yanukovich. Viktor Yushchenko won the election after public protests, dubbed the Orange Revolution, and the Supreme Court's decision to nullify the runoff election (Way 2005).

Yanukovich's pivot from Europe on November 21, 2013, sparked the Maidan protests, which escalated after violent state repression led to civilian deaths (Ischenko, 2020). The situation deteriorated further on January 16, 2014, when Parliament passed ten draconian anti-protest laws—known as Black Thursday—which intensified public outrage and ultimately led to the collapse of Yanukovich's regime (Arel and Driscoll 2023).

The protests turned deadly on February 18, 2014, when approximately 20,000 demonstrators marched toward Parliament to demand the restoration of the 2004 Constitution. Riot police blocked their path and opened fire, prompting clashes in which eleven protesters and four police officers were killed. Over the next two days, security forces intensified their crackdown, setting fire to the Trade Unions Building and attempting to clear Independence Square. On February 20, Interior Minister Vitaliy Zakharchenko authorized live ammunition against protesters, prompting condemnation from Parliament and his suspension. As unrest spread—including a declaration of autonomy in Lviv and the occupation of

¹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/what-eurasian-economic-union>

regional buildings—President Yanukovich signed a deal on February 21 promising early elections and constitutional reforms but fled the country shortly after. In total, 108 protesters and 13 police officers were killed between January and February 2014 (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2016). On February 22, opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko was released and addressed a large crowd in Independence Square, while Parliament began appointing interim leaders and reversing Yanukovich-era policies.

Transparency and accountability were considered major challenges before the Revolution of Dignity (Shapoval et al. 2023). Local governance reform was a key component of the changes in the aftermath of the democracy movement. Prior to 2014, the key administrative units in Ukraine were provinces and districts.

Oblasts are the first-level administrative division in Ukraine, which is a unitary state. It is unitary because there is little legal scope or competence provided to provincial officials in the Ukrainian Constitution and law. The 24 provinces of Ukraine are divided into raions (districts) that function as administrative units governed by a district state administration chairman, a district council, and a mayor or chairman. Leaders of oblasts and raions were not elected but appointed by central government administration. Crimea, under this system, functioned as an autonomous republic.

In 2004, the parliament amended the constitution, changing Ukraine’s political system from a presidential-parliamentary to a parliamentary-presidential republic. In 2010, the Supreme Court of Ukraine declared the 2004 constitutional amendment unconstitutional. A chairman of district administration is nominated by the Cabinet of Ministers and appointed by the President for a 5-year term (i.e., presidential term).

The centralized features of the Ukrainian state gave no autonomy for local self-governance: the pre-2014 constitution emphasized the national government, and the provincial and district governments. Towns and communities did not have any political autonomy. From a broader regional perspective, this was inconsistent with the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Rabinovych and Gawrich 2023).

In June 2014, newly elected President Petro Poroshenko launched a decentralization program that preserved Ukraine’s three-tier administrative map—oblasts, raions, and local hromadas—while radically strengthening the local tier. The reform established a new institution of local territorial self-governance—united territorial community—organized by a principle of self-governance and voluntary association. Previously, Soviet Ukraine’s administrative-territorial system divided the country into 25 provinces, 490 districts, and 10,900 municipalities (Romanova and Umland 2019). Pre-existing village, town, and city hromadas were encouraged to merge voluntarily into larger “united territorial communities” (UTCs). These UTCs became the primary municipalities recognized in law as “territorial hromadas,” reporting directly to the central government rather than to raion or oblast offices and enjoying broad self-governing powers (Rabinovych et al. 2023).

Parliament operationalized the plan in February 2015, authorizing voluntary amalgamation and scheduling the first UTC elections for later that year. By 2021 the number of UTCs increased from 159 to 1,470, each of which averaged 10,563 residents and combined roughly 4.7 former communities (Krasnozhan and Yehorova 2022). As the map consolidated, the total number of districts fell from 490 to 136, including 17 in the Russian-occupied territories.²

² Data are available from Ukraine’s Center for Monitoring the Process of Power Decentralization and Local Governance Reform. Available at <https://decentralization.gov.ua/mainmonitoring>.

Decentralization also boosted local finances. Municipalities' share of national tax revenues climbed from 42 percent in 2014 to 50 percent in 2018, while own-source local taxes grew from 0.7 percent to 26.1 percent of municipal budgets over the same period (Romanova and Umland 2019). By 2019 more than 28 percent of Ukrainians lived under UTC governments (*ibid*). This combination of territorial consolidation, fiscal devolution, and direct accountability to Kyiv marks the core institutional shift introduced by the 2014–2015 reforms and frames the detailed analysis that follows.

In June 2014, President Petro Poroshenko, who was elected after Yanukovich's removal, initiated significant reform of local governance. Under his reorganization, Ukraine would have new administrative organization into oblasts, raions, and hromadas. In Ukrainian, hromada translates as community. These new subnational units, hromadas, became self-governed municipalities, formalized as "territorial hromadas" in Ukrainian legislative acts. They are formal municipal units (Rabinovych et al. 2023). It is important to note that under these reforms, hromadas do not report to raion or oblast authorities, but instead report to authorities at the central level. Within that reporting structure, they have significant autonomy, which we describe in detail subsequently.

Poroshenko's plan was to establish an administrative territory at the local level for the first time since independence in 1991, formed in accordance with established laws, that would include one or more "settlements" (villages, towns, or cities), as well as surrounding adjacent areas. In February 2015, the Ukrainian parliament adopted the law that enabled voluntary creation of these new administrative units, scheduling local elections for them which was proposed later that year.³ Since their establishment, hundreds of communities formed hromadas and held elections for their leadership.

The formation of hromadas did not follow a uniform pattern, as legislation encouraged communities to self-organize hromadas from existing communities. Initially the government encouraged voluntary amalgamation into hromadas. Initial implementation of hromadas was slow, because citizens had little experience with local self-governance, there were challenges in implementing the process (Arends et al. 2023). Despite a slow take-up, by 2017, communities organized 367 new hromadas. Once they formed, they "received new responsibilities and [were] permitted to determine the size and structure of their own executive administrations, even though the central government still decide[d] on the salary levels of local employees" (Jarábik and Yesmukhanova 2017).

By March 2020, voluntary amalgamation led to the creation of 1,070 hromadas (Darkovich, Savisko, and Rabinovych 2023). Under this gradual rollout, any community that did not amalgamate would have decisions about budgets and public affairs made by district and regional officials. Those that amalgamated were able to self-govern. Communities that chose not to amalgamate did not have elections for local officials. Public goods were provided by the central government in non-amalgamated communities. Those that voluntarily amalgamated held elections and assumed greater autonomy (and responsibility) over their public goods and services.

In July 2020, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine established a three-tiered administrative system covering the entire country, with all amalgamated hromadas subsumed under the new system (Crimea was excepted from the provisions). From then on, the territories were simply called hromadas. A key feature of the hromadas is that their structure was voluntarily determined through a local process, with approval by authorities in Kyiv.

³ Draft Law on Amending the Constitution of Ukraine as to Decentralization of Power. Submitted by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on 16 July 2015.

To see the polycentric features, it is useful to consider legislation that would have significantly reduced their autonomy. In 2019 as the central government was implementing these initiatives and hromadas were self-amalgamated on a voluntary basis, remaining issues with the design of institutions of local governance still had to be worked out. In December 2019, a significant constitutional amendment titled “Changes to the Constitution of Ukraine Concerning Decentralization” was proposed but later withdrawn. This bill aimed to formalize the hromada system and restructure the middle tier of government by replacing raions with an amalgamated system, while keeping the oblast structure intact. However, the bill contained a controversial provision that worried advocates of local autonomy: it failed to constitutionally guarantee the devolved powers of local governments. Instead, the draft law would have given parliament the authority to determine: the number of local government units, their territorial boundaries, and the scope of their powers and responsibilities. This arrangement would have effectively meant that local governments’ autonomy could be modified or revoked through regular parliamentary action rather than requiring constitutional amendments, potentially undermining the stability and independence of local governance structures (Malyarenko and Wolff 2020).

The June 2020 reform advanced the decentralization agenda initiated in 2015 by mandating the creation of hromadas, granting all communities a standardized framework for local autonomy. This pivotal step institutionalized meaningful self-governance at the local level across Ukraine, establishing a level of local government autonomy that had not previously existed in the country’s administrative structure.

Under the hromada system, residents petition local authorities—head, deputies of hromada council, and executive committees—to address issues of collective importance, including safety. Citizens were empowered to voice their views about how resources should be spent, and more resources were allocated via local governments rather than going to the central government (Brik and Murtazashvili 2023). Theoretically, direct local participation of this sort can build trust, accountability, and social ties between local officials and ordinary citizens. The reform envisioned that hromada leaders would be more accountable to citizens and this would in turn, improve incentives to provide public goods, building trust in the government, encourage patriotism, and result in a more engaged population (Arends et al. 2023).

3.2 National defense reform

Reform to the system of national defense in Ukraine has been a significant priority as well as a challenge (Akimenko 2018). We focus on two key developments. The first is the rapid assimilation of territorial defense. This occurred in both 2014–2015 and in 2022 after Russia’s full-scale invasion. This first aspect is a monocentric feature of defense, as the private provision was moved into the national system of Ukrainian defense. Second, the monocentric national defense system was decentralized through the establishment of local military administrations. This primarily occurred in 2022 and continues. Since monocentric regimes can be centralized or decentralized, the defense system since Russia’s full-scale invasion is monocentric and decentralized.

Ukraine’s volunteer battalions emerged in 2014 in response to Russia’s occupation of Donbas and annexation of Crimea. Citizens took things into their own hands by forming volunteer brigades in response to the weakness of the army, which performed poorly. Wood (2022, 118, 127–128) explains that some battalions operated for several years after the initial push to exercise control but peaked by September 2014; the last volunteer battalions to

disband were smaller foreign-led ones. The government ordered all non-integrated armed groups to leave frontlines in spring 2015 (Käihkö 2018, 159).

Rapid assimilation followed their success in contributing to the defense of the country. Soon after, President Petro Poroshenko integrated these self-organized, decentralized units into the Ministry of Defense through a new branch called the Territorial Defense Force. With this integration, the brigades then became part of a system of public production of defense, funded and directed by the state. In both directions (production) and funding (provision), they were part of a centralized system rather quickly, as Samuelsonian theory predicts.

The second major reform in addition to the assimilation of voluntary organizations was the creation of local military administrations. When Russia first invaded in 2014, the defense system did not have a system of local military administration. Ukraine fought the war by deploying marines and other military units in a prolonged territorial conflict of varying intensity.

In 2021, Russia increased its troop presence near Ukrainian borders, suggesting that it would launch a larger scale invasion. In response, President Zelensky took advantage of the existing infrastructure of local governance to build up a larger defense force. He signed laws that introduced a system to prepare the population for national resistance. The country's civilian resistance fighters were allowed to be trained and equipped for a possible war in advance of the Russian invasion. Under this reorganization, civilians with limited military experience were encouraged to join these local forces that would be overseen by regular service members (Brik and Murtazashvili 2023).

After Russia's full-scale invasion, Zelensky relied on existing infrastructure to build a larger defense force, encouraging citizens with little or no experience to become equipped and trained for a possible war. After the invasion, local defense forces distributed weapons and other resources to nascent local defense units, thereby contributing local knowledge and capacity. Civilians became state actors, encouraged by the central government, much like any volunteer military. These defense units increased the labor force available for defending the country. By June 2022, there were roughly 110,000 people in these defense forces (Brik and Murtazashvili 2023).

Beyond training civilians to fight, Zelensky introduced reforms to the structure of military administration as part of the martial law, which was initially introduced on February 24, 2022. Martial law authorized public authorities, military command, and local governments to use all powers necessary to avert the threat.

Darkovich and Savisko (2024) describe the features of local military administrations. These are established as a decision of the president of Ukraine, on the recommendation of regional and state administration and local leadership. The organization of the military system, like the government, is organized on three levels: region (oblast), district (raion), and local level (hromada). The hromada military units consist of military personnel, law enforcement officers, civil defense personnel. Accountability is upward: heads of hromada military units are appointed by the president. The head of military administration can be the head of the local self-government body. Unlike hromada self-governing leadership, which is accountable to the people through elections, the local military administrators are accountable to the district and regional administration.

Financing authority also differed. Previously, district and regional councils approved budgets. Under the new military organization, district and regional military administrators approved budgets (previously, it was the city, township, or village council). The heads of local military administrations, where established, would also decide on transfer of funds from the local budget to the Armed Force of Ukraine, which was previously a decision

of locally elected mayors. In addition, some of the hromada, heads of pre-war administrations became head of a military administration; for district and regional level, this was automatic, though at the local level, military personnel, representatives of law enforcement agencies, members of civil defense services, and individuals who had concluded an employment contract with regional military administrations or the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine could be heads of the local military administrations, as could local elected officials, after a security clearance.

Notably, these local military administrations were not established everywhere. Darkovich and Hnyda (2023) highlight that the majority of these local military administrations were concentrated in frontline regions. By 2024, there were 193 local military administrations, with the most in Kherson (50), Zaporizhzhia (45), Donetsk (36), Luhansk (27) and Kharkiv (26) oblasts (Zahorodnii 2024). In Kherson Oblast, all 50 local self-government bodies have been replaced by local military administrations, while in other occupied hromadas, some local self-governance structures remain intact. However, nearly half of these administrations cannot function due to Russian occupation, so they operate instead in Ukrainian-controlled cities.

3.3 The relationship between governance and defense reform

Keudel and Huss (2023) explain how the martial law reforms differ from the reforms that established local government autonomy. Under martial law, community leaders have additional competencies in security. Regional military administrations entrusted with authority to organize provision of social services. Hromadas can tap special funds to meet emergency needs in communities. Martial law also suspended traditional democratic mechanisms, including elections, referendums, protest, and strikes, as well as reduced transparency requirements, including restrictions on the publication of open data.

Darkovich and Savisko (2024) provide the most comprehensive analysis of local military administrations in Ukraine. They emphasize that the establishment of these administrations, authorized under martial law, effectively replaces local self-government. Local military administrations are registered as separate legal and budgetary entities from the hromadas. When a municipal military administration is formed, the head of the administration determines its structure and staffing. Under Part II of Article 10 of the Law “On the Legal Regime of Martial Law,” the Verkhovna Rada, upon the proposal of the President, can authorize the head of the military administration to assume the powers of the elected executive committee and mayor in addition to their military duties. This results in two potential configurations: in one, the city council and mayor retain some authority; in the other, the military administration exercises full control.

As Darkovich and Savisko (2024) note, these arrangements create several challenges for public administration and service provision. When authority is shared, it introduces ambiguity and enables blame-shifting between elected officials and the military administration. Residents may be unsure who is accountable for the provision of public goods or failures in governance. Even in cases where the military administration holds all local authority, there is still uncertainty about their responsibility for non-military functions of government. Additional concerns include weakening the relationship between citizens in frontline hromadas and higher levels of government, as reduced local autonomy diminishes opportunities for civic participation. This loss of participatory governance may erode trust in the state. Staffing shortages and limited resources further constrain the ability of military administrations to provide essential services.

More generally, local military administrations, while necessitated by wartime exigencies, inherently conflict with principles of local autonomy. By design, they centralize authority in the executive, subordinating elected local officials to military leadership. Though temporary in principle—they operate during martial law and up to 30 days after its termination—their presence reshapes governance dynamics and potentially undermines long-term institutional trust and capacity at the local level.

These dynamics highlight fundamental tradeoffs between decentralized defense and local government autonomy. From a public choice perspective, decentralized governance enables better alignment of public services with local preferences, fosters accountability through electoral mechanisms, and allows citizens to monitor and discipline officials more effectively. However, wartime introduces acute collective action problems and coordination challenges that often justify temporary consolidation of authority. The suspension of elections, referenda, and open data provisions reflects an institutional pivot toward executive discretion and away from bottom-up accountability. Yet this comes at a cost: it weakens mechanisms for local voice and exit, increases information asymmetries, and blurs lines of responsibility—particularly when authority is shared or only partially reassigned. Thus, while military administrations may improve short-term responsiveness in high-risk zones, public choice theory cautions that removing local checks, diminishing polycentric structures, and undermining accountability may reduce the state's long-run legitimacy and resilience.

3.4 The wartime role of Hromadas

Hromadas preceded the full-scale invasion and were established primarily for purposes beyond national security. Yet since February 2022, they have continued to play a critical role in delivering essential services, including in frontline areas (Myerson 2023). Official Ukrainian government materials frame the hromada system as a source of local strength capable of resisting external aggression. As stated on the government's decentralization website, "The country consisting of such strong hromadas is difficult to break up from within and from the outside."⁴ This suggests a national commitment to maintaining local autonomy in the long term, with wartime centralization and cooptation viewed as necessary but temporary measures in response to external threats.

Building on this, Keudel and Huss (2023, 2024) argue that hromadas perform essential security functions during wartime. They emphasize that local governments have helped rebuild damaged infrastructure, organize civilian defenses and bomb shelters, and respond to the needs of displaced and unemployed populations. These activities, they argue, require a reconceptualization of national security to include grassroots security, development, and democracy.

A key to the security rationale just mentioned is the notion of institutional resilience. Keudel and Huss (2025) conceptualize institutional resilience in terms of the internal structure of hromadas, including the relationship between local councils and executive bodies, and the institutional processes required to maintain local self-government under Ukraine's decentralization laws. They measure resilience by a hromada's ability to continue delivering essential services—such as waste collection, administrative services via digital

⁴ <https://decentralization.ua/en/gromadas>.

platforms, and temporary office setups—despite challenges like shelling and an influx of internally displaced persons.

Rabinovych et al. (2023) provide additional evidence by interviewing eight local officials in hromadas that experienced direct occupation by Russian forces. These officials identified a broad range of war-related shocks, including institutional, economic, humanitarian, critical infrastructure, informational, and early recovery challenges. In a related study, Rabinovych et al. surveyed hromadas in rear areas—those relatively close to the conflict but not on the front lines—a few months after the full-scale invasion. Their findings suggest that while hromadas are not engaged in national defense in the narrow, military sense, they play a vital role in delivering front-line municipal services. These include providing information and services to internally displaced persons, ensuring basic sanitation, and responding to disruptions in infrastructure.

Rather than draw a sharp distinction between these activities and national defense, we argue that crisis response and resilience are essential—though often underappreciated—components of a broader conception of defense. From this perspective, the provision of local services during wartime is not peripheral but central to maintaining social and territorial integrity under extreme stress. Functional hromadas enable more effective responses to a wide spectrum of war-related shocks, from infrastructure repair to civilian protection, while dysfunctional ones undermine this capacity. These findings support the view that polycentric governance structures—such as Ukraine’s decentralized system—can enhance national resilience by ensuring that locally grounded institutions contribute directly to the broader public good of defense. Understanding how to sustain and improve these contributions requires sustained attention to the institutional design and capacity of local governments, especially in times of crisis.

4 Discussion

First, we return to Samuelson’s (1954) view of public goods. The success of the voluntary battalions led to rapid integration, including battalions such as Azov, which have been discussed significantly for their extremist ideology.

One might see the rapid assimilation as plausibly consistent with Samuelson’s view, which emphasized free riding as the problem motivating centralization. However, it seems just as plausible in this case that incorporation with the state was not necessary to prevent underprovision but was instead explicable via public choice rather than public interest motivations. Incorporation into the state was also useful for increasing output, but more for coordination reasons than for free-rider reasons. There were private defense providers and volunteer battalions, but they were then incorporated into a monocentric but decentralized defense structure directed by the central government. This is only consistent with the Samuelsonian view to the extent that these providers were incorporated is that the central state to prevent underprovision due to free riding.

We suggest two other equally plausible explanations for why the private defense and volunteer battalions were incorporated into a government-led monocentric system. The first such explanation is that while these private and volunteer forces had devised selective incentives that could address problems of underprovision, in a large scale warfighting context it is helpful to have them embedded in a single monocentric organization to solve coordination problems. This is still a case of government stepping in to solve a market failure, albeit of a different kind than emphasized in Samuelsonian public goods theory.

Another plausible hypothesis is that the move towards a monocentric, government directed system was not solving a public goods problem or a coordination problem, but was instead a result of public choice incentives facing political leaders (e.g., they do not want forces outside their control to pose a threat to their power, or they want to be able to claim credit for military successes, or they see the private and volunteer battalions as important interest groups that they can make deals with if they're incorporated into the government, or they want more consolidated power in the central state). The first two explanations—the Samuelsonian public good problems and coordination problems—are essentially market failure plus the interests and incentives of self-interested government officials.

Second, external threat creates incentives for both citizens to come together to provide private defense and creates political incentives to incorporate these organizations. Additionally, the extent to which monocentric defense is centralized or decentralized depends on the threat. In a war for territory, decentralization appears to be an effective response to a rival state seeking territory. Public goods and services as well as military responses to invasion are coproduced, but that view is incomplete as it is mainly a description of the nature of how public goods are provided. The effectiveness of provision of public goods and services depended to an extent on the way in which local autonomy provided incentives to participate in governments. Autonomy of local governments alongside greater responsibility given to locally operating military administrations together appear to explain Ukraine's success in responding to Russia's full-scale invasion.

Third, local government autonomy appears important during war, but it is not primarily in terms of warfighting because they do not specifically provide defense. Their role is in providing resilience. They also contribute to reconstruction, which has been an ongoing consideration in the current war. The reason why they have been effective may be because they have experience governing themselves more than in the past, due to greater autonomy under the constitutional reforms, as well as because reforms which established self-governance contribute to local buy-in with the government. They continue to play a significant role in crisis response and reconstruction.

The role of autonomous governments, and the potential that they make for a stronger Ukraine, suggests another question: Could these reforms have prevented the loss of territory in 2014, and perhaps deterred Russia from the full-scale invasion? There are many possibilities to why Russia was successful in 2014, including timing and location of invasion, as well as the support of citizens in the east sympathetic to Russia. While it is not possible to know whether polycentric governance reforms would have turned citizens away from supporting Russia in the east, or if decentralizing military reforms would have prevented the loss of territory, there is some evidence it might have reduced some loss.

Perhaps more autonomy could have prevented Russian takeover of Crimea and Donbas. However, there are clearly other factors that contributed to such support. Most of the population in this region in these largely Russian-speaking regions had a history of supporting pro-Russia movements or parties and region voted overwhelmingly for Viktor Yanukovich in 2004 and 2010. It is somewhat speculative to presume that autonomy would have prevented conflict.

Similarly, it is reasonable to ask whether the sort of mobilization Zelensky presided over in 2021 could have prevented the occupation of Donbas and annexation of Crimea. Any of the changes in 2021 could have been made, in theory, in 2014, especially after Yanukovich's removal from office. One speculation is that had that been done, it would have made secession more likely. Beyond that, it is reasonable to consider whether more robust local governance would have avoided the problem of people feeling like Kyiv left them behind in the east, as some have suggested.

Speculating on what could have prevented the territorial losses is always uncertain, though useful to understand how reforms have proceeded. What we do know is that Ukrainian policy has been guided by the belief in the importance of having citizens ready to mobilize, that local autonomy to generate buy-in and provide for greater services in the event of crises is important to reduce vulnerability to Russia propaganda and meddling, that self-governing military responses developed by citizens are an important source of strength to be incorporated into the Ukrainian defense system, and that a sensible way to decentralized defense is to coopt trusted and in some instances, officials who previously were elected by citizens.

Finally, it is important to consider the role of foreign military aid in Ukraine's wartime resilience and its implications for public choice analysis. Ukraine's ability to resist Russia's aggression depends not only on the resolve of its citizens and the strength of its institutions, but also on sustained international support—particularly from the United States and European allies. While such aid has been vital in enabling Ukraine to defend itself, it also raises concerns frequently identified by public choice scholars regarding the unintended consequences of foreign intervention.

A reasonable critique of our perspective is that it underemphasizes the role of U.S. military and financial support, which has been pivotal to Ukraine's defense. However, that very reliance invites scrutiny. Critics—sometimes dismissed as isolationist—have warned that unconstrained foreign aid may incentivize governments to prolong conflicts or reject negotiated settlements, especially when military asymmetries are amplified by powerful external patrons. From a public choice standpoint, these are not moral claims but institutional concerns about how the incentives generated by the defense-industrial complex and geopolitical patronage may distort domestic decision-making and reduce the incentives for peaceful resolution.

Public choice theorists have long emphasized that foreign aid, including military assistance, can generate perverse incentives for recipient governments. Even when directed toward ostensibly just causes, such aid can unintentionally strengthen coercive state capacity in ways that threaten civil liberties or entrench militarized governance. Coyne (2008, 2013) has shown that foreign aid provided to countries experiencing war or prolonged conflict, including insurgencies, may expand a state's repressive capacity and reduce the political costs of internal abuse. Dutta et al. (2013) further argue that aid often exacerbates institutional divergence, where countries with strong institutions become more effective, while those with weak institutions may experience greater corruption or repression. Beyond this, foreign aid in reconstruction efforts contributes to increased opportunities for predation, weakened incentives for domestic reform, and the distortion of accountability structures (Murtazashvili and Murtazashvili 2020; Shapoval and Murtazashvili 2022).

Ukraine has undoubtedly received substantial international aid, but the reported figure of \$60 billion in U.S. military assistance is likely overstated, as another estimate places it closer to \$18.3 billion (Fedyk and Hodson 2025). Even at this lower level, such large-scale assistance raises important questions from a public choice perspective, including concerns about rent-seeking, weakened fiscal discipline, and the long-term effects of aid on domestic governance incentives.

Transparency reforms and public scrutiny have helped enhance the credibility of government institutions and may explain continued Western support (Shapoval et al. 2024). Moreover, Ukraine's military performance has been accompanied by strong civic mobilization and a demonstrated commitment to democratic governance. Nevertheless, public choice analysis cautions against complacency. As Ukraine's military becomes more

professionalized, its access to foreign resources—especially cutting-edge technologies like drones—raises questions about how such capabilities will be governed after the war.

In this context, it is essential to recognize the dangers of “blank checks” in foreign military assistance. Even in morally just conflicts like Ukraine’s defense against Russia, the absence of clear constraints or exit strategies can generate new institutional vulnerabilities, including over-centralization, diminished local autonomy, or creeping militarization of civilian life. Ensuring that aid supports Ukraine’s commitment to democratic self-governance remains one of the most significant institutional challenges in the postwar period, including once the country is able to focus more on reconstruction than warfighting.

5 Conclusion

We have argued that free riding and its suppression through conscription, taxation, and other coercive measures is not the central explanation for Ukraine’s wartime defense success. Instead, the key dynamic lies in the incorporation of successful private and grassroots initiatives into the national security apparatus. The government’s decision to scale up and assimilate these efforts reflects recognition of their effectiveness. It is not a mechanical response to a collective action problem, as sometimes suggested in standard public choice accounts of national defense.

Private provision of defense can be effective, but its very success tends to invite rapid assimilation into state-led systems. This raises a deeper question about institutional design: when should defense provision be centralized, and when is decentralization preferable? In theory, decentralization can improve responsiveness and effectiveness—particularly in areas facing more acute threats. Ukraine’s local military administrations, though decentralized in structure, are embedded in a monocentric system: they operate under central control, even if they leverage local capacity and generate citizen trust and engagement. This system appears to have been more effective in holding territory after the full-scale invasion than the pre-2014 security arrangements.

Looking ahead, a central challenge for Ukraine is how to demobilize while preserving the civil liberties and local autonomy that have underpinned its resistance to Russian aggression. As Rouanet and Piano (2023) observe, conscription has historically been closely tied to the expansion of centralized state authority. Coyne and Hall (2018, 2021) warn that military institutions—regardless of whether they operate through centralized command or localized structures—often create pressures toward domestic militarization, administrative expansion, and diminished civilian oversight. In Ukraine’s case, bottom-up defense efforts played a vital role in countering the Russian threat. However, the subsequent integration of these initiatives into state structures may unintentionally erode the political and institutional reforms that had previously expanded local autonomy and democratic accountability.

Nonetheless, evidence suggests that Ukraine remains committed to democratic governance and liberty, even under the strain of war. There is strong public and institutional support for political reform and decentralization (Shapoval et al. 2024). Ukraine faced significant institutional challenges—most notably, the relative underdevelopment of a liberal economic order, including low levels of economic freedom—before Russia’s full-scale invasion (Bunyk and Krasnozhan 2018).

These challenges of establishing a robust liberal economic order remain. In this respect, the classical liberal tradition has long emphasized the role of institutional constraints and

dispersed authority in securing economic freedom. The link between polycentric governance and more credible commitments to economic liberty, as highlighted by Weingast (1995), is especially relevant for Ukraine's long-term institutional trajectory. Progress in establishing autonomous local governance is both a source of optimism and magnify the importance of considering the risks of re-centralization in response to crises.

Paradoxically, the coercive military draft may also reinforce democratic commitments. As Adam (2012) argues, universal military conscription can deepen civic engagement and national solidarity, ultimately resulting in consolidation of democracy and democratic reforms. For Ukraine, the mandatory nature of military service may help reinforce the post-Maidan project of democratic renewal. This is further supported by Ukraine's robust constitutional provisions for local self-government, which offer a legal and institutional focal point for restoring local autonomy after the war. The legacy of the Revolution of Dignity—grounded in demands for transparency and accountability—may help anchor expectations for the postwar political order.

Another promising development is the emergence of new forms of local public administration. In many cases, individuals have served dual roles—as both elected mayors and leaders of local military administrations. This experience may create institutional memory and personal investment in preserving local autonomy. Officials returning to peacetime governance will be re-entering a system that, for the first time in Ukraine's modern history, granted meaningful autonomy to local governments—a fact that may serve as a powerful check on future centralization.

Even so, the end of the war will not mark the end of the Russian threat. As Finkel (2024, 3) notes, “Russian violence against Ukraine is neither sudden nor unprecedented. The ongoing aggression, the mass murder, and the ideas that undergird them...are products of a two-hundred-year-old history.” As such, a decentralized but monocentric defense apparatus is likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future. The ongoing challenge will be to balance local autonomy with national defense coherence—ensuring that the institutions which enabled wartime resilience do not erode in the name of security. So far, Ukraine's experience suggests that a hybrid model—combining local initiative with national coordination—can both strengthen defense capacity and preserve the foundations of a liberal, democratic state.

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