

Territorial communities during the war: resilience and security in conditions of the direct threat to life



Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts



The study was conducted, deciphered,
processed and thematically analyzed
to identify recurring themes and patterns
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Photo: **Kostiantyn Ovsianynkov**

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH, ETHICS, METHODOLOGY, AND DATA ANALYSIS

The research focuses on the everyday experiences of people who have been under occupation for a long time, got into the zone of a natural disaster caused by the explosion of the Kakhovka Reservoir in June 2023, as well as the threat of the explosion of the Zaporizhzhya NPP present in the information field.

Time of the research: August - September 2023.

The key methods – are in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

1) 2 focus group discussions (herein further, FGD) with representatives of communities geographically located in the upper and lower parts of the former Kakhovka reservoir: Zaporizhzhia region (participants: 4 men, 6 women; 30-40 years old – 2, 41-50 years old – 2 people; 51-60 years old – 4; 61 and older – 2), Kherson oblast (participants: 4 men, 6 women; 30-40 years old – 3, 41-50 years – 2 people; 61 and older – 5).

2) 5 in-depth interviews with people who hold managerial positions in the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts (4 men, 1 woman). In-depth interviews were chosen as a method that allows for creating a space of trust and ensures a high level of confidentiality of the conversation.

The research was conducted in areas close to the front line and near the former Kakhovka Reservoir, taking into account the participants' previous experience of being under occupation and facing a high level of danger associated with the explosion of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant (hereinafter HPP) and the proximity of the Zaporizhzhia NPP, which could potentially be used by the occupiers as a "dirty bomb." All participants in the research provided informed consent and at the time of the study were in the controlled by the Ukrainian government areas, so there was no direct threat to their lives.

The research was conducted under the principles of grounded theory. The guide contained only the key areas of conversation (reflection on previous experience of amalgamated territorial communities) (hromadas, amalgamated hromadas) (hereinafter AHs) establishment and functioning; changes that occurred in the community due to the war; perception of security in general and human security;

the impact of the experience of a man-made disaster on the perception of security; the vision of the future). During the focus groups and in-depth interviews, we followed people's thoughts, avoiding excessive detail, which allowed us to shift the focus to the thoughts, knowledge, and experiences that primarily concern our research participants. All interviews with the research participants, both in group and individual formats, were recorded after receiving informed consent. The recordings were then transcribed¹. At the initial stage, the interview fragments related to the key research questions were line-by-line open-coded. The codes were then categorized and organized around an axial coding related to the role of AHs during the war. This helped us to assess the extent to which the decentralization reform and previous experience of self-government affected people's daily lives during the war.

¹ The local southern Ukrainian dialect was preserved as much as possible during the transcription process. We believe that its preservation in the transcripts deepens the understanding of the situation and human experiences in this part of Ukraine.

BRIEF RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The process of hromadas' formation in southern Ukraine as assessed by the local residents

The question of the process of creating and functioning of hromadas before the full-scale invasion in the context of the decentralization reform in Ukraine causes a critical reaction and rather negative assessments among the locals. According to our participants, the reform was carried out without taking into account their interests and ignoring their unwillingness to amalgamate with anyone. Accordingly, the result of the reform is presented rather as losses: resource (less money remains in the settlement) and time (more time is spent on documentary procedures due to the transfer of public services to the new hromada center).

However, in this case, we are talking about a rather brief span of time. Since the studied AHs were established with a significant delay, in 2020², we are talking about, in fact, their initial two-year cycle of operation. The positive aspects of the study participants' assessment of the reform's impact before the full-scale invasion are primarily related to visible results (repair of buildings, asphalt coating of the roads, maintenance of utilities, etc.).

Formation of an active core of local self-government

Further detailing of the experience of the operation of the AH allows us to talk about the deeper consequences of the decentralization reform, which are not fully understood by the participants of the process themselves.

One of these consequences was the formation of an active core of the community, which gained leadership and effective management experience before the start of the full-scale Russian invasion.

It was these people who were ready to act under catastrophic conditions, to make decisions and take responsibility, and their previous experience told them that no one else would do it for them and without them.

² Decentralization reform began in Ukraine in 2015.

War and democracy

Among all other risks and tragedies, during the war, Ukraine found itself in a situation of testing the strength of its own democracy. The democratic system is a construct, a set of declared values, an orientation model that has a huge number of variations and specific local manifestations.

Today, we see the aggravation of a considerable number of problems related to the present-day Ukrainian democracy, and polarity in assessments of the possibility of democratic development of the country. The same people talk about representatives of the authorities and their own neighbors in a negative light and at the same time demonstrate extraordinary capacity for consolidation under conditions of the direct threat to life; expect orders from management and at the same time become organizers and initiators of unique local projects to save people's lives and creators of permanent forms of mutual support.

Such a situation is a significant challenge for local communities and a test for Ukrainian democracy. However, even under the circumstances of war, centralization of power, and weakening influence of local self-government, we are still talking about the evaluation of the quality of democracy and democratic procedures, and not about the absence of democracy as such.

Human security under conditions of war, occupation, and technogenic disaster

Speaking about safety, the research participants understand it in a broad sense, reproducing the key aspects of the concept of human security. However, the war, the occupation, and the man-made disaster associated with the explosion of the Kakhovka HPP (Dam) and the flooding of the territories caused the transformation of priorities in the field of security, as well as deepened the understanding of its certain aspects. The protection of human life comes to the fore, which is associated with the presence of shelters, bomb shelters, and air defense; with an established shelling alert system; correct information policy (which includes the fight against disinformation, as well as timely and scientifically or experimentally reasonable informing the population about existing threats and response protocols).

In addition to basic needs - access to food, water, safe housing, earning opportunities, and access to medical services, the participants emphasized the

importance of measures to mitigate problems in the field of mental health of the population.

Additional nuances in the understanding of safety became the image of a "dangerous space" - that is, a space that for many years to come will remain filled with instruments of murder - mines, and shells. Sound and time aspects of safety have become additional components of the construct - human security. The sound dimension of security was articulated by research participants as the right for calm and safe silence (as opposed to dangerous silence, which is not silence in essence, but only the expectation of the next aggressive violation of silence). Temporary silence does not solve the safety problem, limits a person in everything - in communication and rest, drives people into basements and other closed spaces, that provide a feeling of temporary protection and the possibility of recovery.

The time dimension of safety is as important as its sound dimension. Life in anticipation of shelling, life in basements, without the ability to maintain the previous way of life - these are losses that cannot be compensated, just as it is impossible to compensate for a life lost due to death. The time dimension of safety includes a time perspective - the ability to plan for the future. Under the conditions of war, people's lives seem to be put on pause, so it is about temporary losses that concern not only the present but also the future - this is an incomplete education, unplanned life strategies, unrealized career or family plans, etc.

However, the most interesting point in understanding human security through the lens of war and man-made catastrophes is the problem of restoring the previous normality, the usual way of life. For a long time, people will not be able to go for mushrooms in mined areas, due to the explosion of the Kakhovka HPP, people will no longer have access to fishing (both as a hobby and as a business); new fruit trees will not soon grow in the flooded yards, which will now lack water for irrigation ; never again will there be old places for warm family gatherings in devastated houses; the photographic memory of families will never be restored without the photo archives obliterated during the shelling. It is the understanding of a future lost forever that potentially could have been, but no longer will be.

Resilience of hromadas and social cohesion

After the start of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian society demonstrated an extraordinary level of cohesion and ability to respond to the challenges of war in a matter of hours, unlike most international humanitarian organizations, which demonstrated certain bureaucratic inertia in responding, as well as many security restrictions that did not allow them to continue their humanitarian activities under the given conditions of war³.

Here we see a paradoxical situation: people who mainly negatively evaluate the representatives of the authorities elected by themselves, their neighbors, or situational and conditional “strangers” (forced migrants; representatives of businesses working under occupation conditions; people who take the money and humanitarian aid from the occupiers, etc.), in extreme conditions, become spontaneous or permanent volunteers, find unexpected solutions, demonstrate extraordinary cohesion, the ability to consolidate efforts with representatives of the authorities, business structures, the public sector, and international organizations, and are ready to save people despite a direct threat to life.

Under the conditions of occupation, locals managed to find hybrid forms of activity that did not allow the occupied territories to completely leave the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian state. A significant role here was played by business structures that worked with previous suppliers, found new ones, tried to legalize their activities under the legislation of both countries (Ukraine and the Russian Federation), or worked illegally.

Not less important were the newly created aid groups, which combined the principles of the state structure and civil society organization and developed specific procedures for restoring access to Ukrainian state services for people who found themselves in territories not under the control of the Ukrainian government.

In the conditions of occupation, these hybrid forms helped to survive, but for the future, the research participants consider them as such that they can create tension in society due to radically different experiences of people and,

³ Stoddard, A., Harvey, P., Timmins, N., Pakhomenko, V., Breckenridge, M.-J., & Czwarno, M. (2022, June 10). Enabling the local response: Emerging humanitarian priorities in Ukraine March–May 2022. Humanitarian Outcomes.

consequently, different attitudes to what happened in the occupied territories.

Another important point is that under the catastrophic conditions of war and technogenic disaster, people realized the working mechanism, functionality, and sustainability of horizontal connections – which was actually one of the expected results of decentralization.

The resilience of hromadas and their ability to resist in the southern Ukrainian context has a paradoxical nature. When the decentralization reform is discussed as a state policy, and local government representatives are seen as a component of the general state management system, people perceive and evaluate the AH negatively, talk about the “imposition” of these reforms, their needlessness, the appearance of numerous hurdles, that make life difficult. On the other hand, in a critical situation of social and/or technogenic catastrophe, the same community (which began to refer to itself as a “hromada” in everyday communication) is capable of greater consolidation of efforts (some good deeds give rise to others), building horizontal interactions, demonstrates a high level of cohesion, readiness to help anyone in need without expecting gratitude and despite the direct threat to life.

Awareness of one’s own experience of stability and unity prompts people to talk about it as a phenomenon of a planetary, world nature. Despite the recognition of all the challenges of such a union in the future, it is not talked about as a theoretical possibility, but as a practice based on previous experience, which is quite possible to be repeated in the future.

DETAILED REPORT ON RESEARCH RESULTS

The process of hromadas formation in the south of Ukraine in the assessments of local residents

The decentralization reform in Ukraine is considered one of the most successful, although, like all others, it was delayed to some extent due to the war. Our research made it possible to detail the process of creating hromadas and the impact of this experience on the subsequent behavior, choices, and actions of people whose lives were directly affected by this reform. In this research, we look at these processes from the perspective of ordinary residents and community leaders who, through various forms of activism and in the course of their own career growth, have assumed leadership positions.

Despite the fact that the decentralization reform has been ongoing since 2015, by the time of 2020, the voluntary potential of creating hromadas was exhausted, and for those localities where the voluntary organization of AH did not take place, this reform was implemented due to the requirement to comply with the resolutions of the Verkhovna Rada. The resolution of the Verkhovna Rada of July 17, 2020 “On the Formation and Liquidation of Regions” № 807-IX⁴ approved the new regional division of the territory of Ukraine. Those settlements that did not form or were not part of the AH had to start implementing the decisions approved by the Ukrainian parliament.

So we see that for part of the population of Ukraine, democracy came in a not very democratic way, and decentralization was introduced “from above”. Therefore, both the perception of this reform and the assessment of its consequences are contradictory:

Participant 6 (woman, 63 y.o.): *In general, we did not want to unite. We wanted to be each our own village. And for some reason, when this amalgamation was going on, it was very tight. Also, there was an offer in 2015. Then even later. But still, **the consent was not given.** Then, as it is*

⁴ Постанова ВРУ 17 липня 2020 року «Про утворення та ліквідацію районів». – Електронний ресурс: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/807-20#Text>

said, **they drew us all together**, that's all, no one asked anyone anymore - and on October 15 or 31 there were elections, we amalgamated in a hromada. (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

Participant 5 (woman, 64 y.o.): Well this is unreal! We stayed as long as we could, didn't unite! We were silently amalgamated - that's it! since there can not be a hromada in hromada! It can't. (FGR, Kherson oblast)

Participant 5 (woman, 64 y.o.): It was three years before we had it all organized. Then there was a voluntary association. But since **we voluntarily didn't unite with anyone** - then the last deadlines came, as we were told that this was **a guideline from above!** Last deadlines! And all villages should be amalgamated into hromadas! And so, there were elections, and it was at these elections that the head of the AH was voted for. And then already, as already once again, as it was explained to us - because we asked, this question was asked - why was the headship not elected? The headship, it was told, was not to be elected, but appointed. That's all! This is how our AH was formed. (FGR, Kherson oblast.)

Participant 8 (man, 65 y.o.): The elections have passed. And the AH was organized. But the elections were held without us. Yes. We didn't even know that it happened. Of course, the headman also had to be chosen. That's right, they were appointed! Well, these positions, they all had to be elected. The chairman of this AH, or who is he? Is it the head? And the headman! For each village, they have to be chosen by the people! (FGR, Kherson oblast.)

According to all research participants, the process of decentralization was difficult. Local residents still assess the consequences of the AH formation for them as rather negative. Among the explanations are the complications of bureaucratic procedures, the increase in the cost of the implementation of any local projects, the increase in the distance to key services, etc.

Participant 6 (woman, 63 y.o.): Well, so to speak, so that it was very good, honestly? I say my opinion - no. Here we had our own, as they say, our own bookkeeping, our own finances - **we used them** as we wanted.

And now we don't decide - what will be given to us. And somehow it seems to me that... My village receives the least! Yes! (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

Participant 7 (man, 66 y.o.): Do you want **me to get a certificate?** I can't walk - I have to go get a certificate! And the need to stand there [in the queue]! And he will look at you like a rooster from a henhouse! «What did you want?» But I don't want anything from you, sonny! I want a certificate! (FGR, Kherson oblast.)

Participant 6 (woman, 63 years old): Well, it was better for us on our own - that we knew that the district, **it liked us, it would always give us funds.** But now...

Interviewer: Is there a certain competition already?

Participant 6: Yes. (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

Participant 7 (man, 66 y.o.): I think that our [names of villages in the Kherson oblast] **should refuse this AH.** Because it **doesn't give anything!** We had some funds - they are gone! We! Were there any funds in [name of village in Kherson oblast]? We don't know whether it was there and where it went. [names of villages in the Kherson oblast], all those there... Lying villages nearby that belong to [name of a village in the Kherson oblast]... No one knows anything! Where did these funds go? And so, a bomb shelter? Oleksandrivna said it right! I'm 66! I'll come with a shovel! And I'll help you dig somewhere, and build a bomb shelter! But it should be here! Do not run to [name of village in Kherson oblast]! The village council should be here! And the head of the village council must rule! As Viktorivna predicted, the club will be repaired - she repaired the club! They started to drive here! They sent 3 people, I'm a witness! Three men! And this is one person! The amount of the project, as Anatoliy says, is like this! Another one says it is like that! And the third claims it's like that! And this all - one person gives money! For the project! And so we choose, it seems, the smallest - and it turns out to be the largest! The most expensive! Vasya smiled correctly! We don't need assistants! (FGR, Kherson oblast.)

Recognition of the positive points is much more restrained and is primarily related to visible and quite tangible enhancements and improvements to the basic infrastructure.

Participant 6 (woman, 63 y.o.): *No, there is a positive. We are getting to. Which way, we are developing. So we patched the asphalt. The playground is being repaired, schools are being maintained, and kindergartens are being maintained. The lighting was done for us. Yes. It was done before, but now it has been brought into compliance with these conditions, which corresponds. And everything is not so bad! (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)*

The question about the process of creation and functioning of communities before the start of a full-scale invasion in the context of the reform of the decentralization of power in Ukraine causes a critical reaction and rather negative evaluations from the local residents. According to our participants, the reform was carried out without taking into account their interests and ignoring their reluctance to amalgamate with anyone. Accordingly, the result of the reform is presented rather as losses: resource (less money remains in the settlement) and time (documentary procedures take more time due to the transfer of state services to a new hromada center). However, in this case, we are talking about a rather short period of time.. Since the studied AHs were established with a significant delay, we are talking about, in fact, their initial two-year cycle of operation. The positive aspects of the study participants' assessment of the reform's impact before the full-scale invasion are primarily related to visible results (repair of buildings, asphalt coating of the roads, maintenance of utilities, etc.). However, further detailing of the experience of the AH operation allows us to talk about the deep consequences of the decentralization reform, which are not fully understood by the participants of the process themselves. One of these consequences was the formation of an active core of the hromada, which gained leadership and effective management experience before the start of the full-scale Russian invasion.

Formation of an active core of local self-government

Our interviews with people who hold **managing positions** in the territory of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts allow us to look at the processes of decentralization from a slightly different angle and from the position of those representatives of the local community who, under the difficult circumstances of war and occupation, were ready to take responsibility and embark on solving the life issues of local hromadas.

In this regard, **the career trajectories of these people** are of special interest. Before assuming the positions of heads of military administrations, most of them had behind them many socially important projects, participation in organized volunteer groups, work in civil society structures, cooperation with international organizations, etc. However, at the level of everyday perception in their environment, this activity was perceived more as a deviation from the norm rather than as a norm:

What I was doing before the war was perceived here in the hromada as the efforts of a city madman. Because I spoke here about sorting garbage, developing tourism, love for one's homeland, about self-identity. And they looked at me as... well, let him have fun, the boy is having fun, let him have fun. And I was perceived as a local madman, and here you imagine a local madman becoming an authority. Of course, in the ruling circles of [name of settlement] hromada, it was perceived as «Oh my God, oh my God, now everything will disappear, everything will collapse.» (Male, managerial position.)

The research participants emphasize that the decision about their own leadership and holding an important and responsible position in wartime conditions was not easy for them. Practically all of them talk about their position in the categories of compulsion (“I never wanted this position”, “if not me, then who?”, “no one else wanted to take the plunge”), temporality (“I’m here part-time, but I continue to officially work in my previous position” and feeling unappreciated (“no one will notice your feat”):

At present the posts, all positions in the military administration are temporary positions. In general, I am [position] [Name of the city] of the city center of social services for families, children, and youth. At the moment, I am performing my duties [...] **This is not my desire**, I will say right away. It just so happened that during the occupation, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, my structure was one of those that took care of women and children who found themselves in difficult life circumstances both before the war and now. Under my organization, under the center of social services, there are two social institutions located in the city of [City name]. It is a secret shelter for victims of domestic violence and a mother-child social center. They have different tasks, but the main thing is to provide social assistance, integration, protection, and so on. And the main thing is that people do not end up on the street. Therefore, these are 24-hour facilities where women with children, women without children, pregnant women, or women with newborn children up to one and a half years of age stay. (Man, managerial position.)

From the third time, we already, well, as it were, convinced, because, well, there was, as I understand it, a military administration, in this there was a need, there was a deputy for these issues, and there was simply an administrative collapse because there was no one to administer the whole sphere **I agreed for two months**. I said, I will say, so to make it possible to find a replacement for me later and calmly replace me. But for that position, that post, and that area of responsibility, which is currently my direction, well, I will say, **no one applied**. And did not volunteer. Then they told me that it was like that before the de-occupation too. Because it is, well, people consider it unappreciated, unprofitable work, and so on. Well, **someone has to do it**. For now, I'll say yes, to be honest, **I'm stuck**. (Man, managerial position.)

This is part of the Red Cross of Ukraine in the Kherson oblast, and several other small groups, because they were resourceful, we knew that they knew how to do it, and not just distribute [humanitarian aid] on the streets

*without understanding why and what they were doing, it is very important for us. And we started these logistical processes together with them. And also from people who just came because there were, you remember, such rare meetings. We had everything near the Kherson City Council. That is why we really suggested to people, that if there is an opportunity, you are ready to put your efforts into doing it. Because as we said right away, **no one sees your work. That is, no one will ever see your feat.** This is very hard work, and if you are ready to harness it with us, then welcome to our ship. A lot of people came through, so yes. And then the core has already been formed, and now I have everything that works, there are four guys who started working with us right at the beginning, and since November, they are working. (Man, managerial position.)*

On the first day of a full-scale invasion, these people, on the one hand, experienced a moment of confusion, inability to believe what was happening, but at the same time, they began to act in a situation of complete uncertainty and lack of coordination of actions, relying on their own previous management experience and based on their own understanding the situation.

*And then I **just gave the command** to those people who were next to me, because it was physically difficult to do all this on the second floor, to collect documents, seals, and access, my laptop. After all, I had them all, I had the right to sign first, given to me by the session of the executive committee, and these were accesses to the treasury, well, all these programs that the local self-government body needs. I was in my own car in the morning, well, there was, of course, a company car, but I didn't use it. We just threw everything we could into the car, I, without even entering the apartment, **made the decision to go** [through the life-threatening part of the road]. It was scary, I drove to [name of the city], but I called the regional military administration, well then it was not yet a military administration, or maybe it already was, maybe there was already a presidential decree, they were simply transformed. But, unfortunately, no one picked up the phone, the chief specialist of the organization department picked up the phone, he*

is now [occupied area]..., I understand that he is a traitor, he cooperates with the occupiers, but at that moment he was the only one who picked up the phone. I say **what should I do**, I am not just alone, I am with the material, I am with the documents, I am with everything in the world. He says save yourself. I **didn't know how to save myself, because I didn't receive any instructions** [...] When I left here on the side of [name of the city], the shelling of the airfield of [name of the city] started again, and I'm just in the very epicenter of all these explosions. I moved to the gas station, and then I called my husband, he shouted at me and he said: "How don't you understand, this is a gas station that can get blown out due to any explosion, you need to go somewhere further." Well, that is, it was, you know, such chaos in my head, I remember this day very hard now, I didn't know where I had to go. Well, you know, it was up to me to what extent, I even worried even for myself there, well, it's just, well, I understand that it was wrong. Because the value for yourself is your life and health. I was worried about the fact that I have documents in my car that I have to give to someone somewhere, or children somewhere, or something... I don't know, for some reason I thought that I had to give it all to someone, this way and this way, well, so they stayed with me. But I want to say that at that time **it was one of the right decisions because we managed to continuously pay people money** [...] and we didn't stop funding, supporting people, that is, we did all this without any debt and so on. That was my first full-scale invasion day. (Woman, managerial position.)

When everything started, my main task, like everyone else's, was **what to do, where to run, or to save the family, drive them out, or do something else, because everyone was confused**. It is not necessary to say here, that someone shook there, someone became a hero, and so on. Here the question is how specifically everyone perceived that situation. In connection with the fact that **we did not have the opportunity and did not know** clear actions and safety, first of all, actions regarding the evacuation of those women who were staying with us with children, because [Name of

*the city], we remember, they entered very quickly. And it was a big question for us, even if we don't find a suitable transport there, how safe it will be to put women with children, with small children in this transport, where to send them because the communications were broken. And will they run into shelling and so on... So we concentrated on another aspect because we understood that there might be street fights. We started doing things in such a way as **to provide these facilities for autonomous stay and existence for at least 2-4 weeks**. That is, these are food, water, hygiene, medicine, and so on. It was also necessary **to carry out direct work and give instructions to the personnel who worked with us**. (Man, managerial position.)*

The participants of the study recognize the forced character of the decentralization reform that took place in some localities but emphasize that, under the existing conditions, it would be impossible to teach people grassroots democracy differently.

*That is, [a settlement in the south of Ukraine], as a city, as the center of a hromada, they did not unite around themselves, did not propose, for example, the creation of a hromada there. Everything dragged on so much, **it was amorphous**. And even when, say, in July of 2020, this resolution was issued. Well, we call it about "**forced decentralization**", you know what it's about, about creating hromadas, but even then no measures were taken to prepare the hromada for further life. (Woman, managerial position.)*

The study participants consider the specific political culture of the local population, paternalism, and populism to be the main obstacles to the development of decentralization.

*Perceiving **the authority** as a structure that will solve all our problems for us, unfortunately, is also a wrong approach, in my opinion, because the echoes of the Soviet system that you work there, and the state will think for you, unfortunately, it is still there. And to invest in this system, we are still in such a long transition period... I hope that our children will still make it, because the responsibility is not only with the authorities, the*

responsibility is also with the people, with the citizens. (Man, managerial position.)

*And that's what I was perceived as, well, time, but people perceived me more as a new, **new broom, a new Stalin**. I am about? about **to kick everyone out**, everyone. And I perfectly understood that, well, okay, now I'm keeping everyone away. And who will I have to work with? (Man, managerial position.)*

The main asset of the decentralization reform was the formation of a layer of active people, whose behavior toward the local population was transformed from a deviation to the norm, from the image of “city madmen” to a role model and an example to follow. It was these people who were ready to act under catastrophic conditions, to make decisions and take responsibility, and their previous experience told them that no one else would begin to do it for them and without them.

War and democracy

The war became a considerable challenge for Ukrainian democracy. The transfer of the right of local administration from the AH to military-civilian administrations under the conditions of a full-scale invasion is a retreat from democracy and a suspension of the reform of decentralization of power. The already complicated processes of involving wide circles of people in the procedures of self-government, and the formation of a culture of grassroots democracy became even more complicated because of the war.

The research participants see the problem primarily in the fact that the decentralization process at the time of the start of the full-scale invasion was transitional and incomplete, its results strongly depended on local conditions and the support of the population. The war interrupted the reformation dynamics, freezing many problems in a transitional state.

***Decentralization in our country has not reached its end, it has not entered the system.** Therefore, to talk about whether it was good or not good... We have an example at the moment. Paving, reconstruction of stadiums, and so on [...] That is, this is the attitude of some financial structures that come temporarily to solve one or another problem. That*

is, we do not have a permanent political elite. We have personalities, we have some outbursts, especially before elections, activities – that's all. However, the political elite is not formed in our country. It affects from top to bottom because of not physical workload, but of moral. Because the local people also think that if it is possible there, then we also want to go there. I also want to go to a resort, I also want to have a yacht, and so on. (Man, managerial position.)

Interviewer: But, in principle, has life in the hromada changed in any way? Did people somehow start behaving differently?

■ ***Participant 8 (man, 65 years old): So what? As they lived - so they live!***

■ ***Participant 5 (woman, 64 years old): No, not at all.***

Interviewer: Yes.

■ ***Participant 5: What were they grumbling about then, what are they muttering about now...***

Interviewer: Yes.

■ ***Participant 5: What then, someone did not like something - what now?! It's life! And peasants are peasants! (FGR, Kherson oblast.)***

The transfer of all power to civil–military administrations is perceived as a departure from democracy and usurpation of power. The need for such actions is recognized under wartime conditions, as it enables rapid response to problems. However, such a situation is considered a temporary response to emergency conditions. The research participants emphasize the need to find safeguards for such usurpation in a timely manner and to return to the decentralization logic of power organization in the future.

■ ***As for the wartime, if we were, for example, with a stable democracy and developed political institutions, then, probably, it could exist in this case as it is currently in Ukraine. That is, local self-government had opportunities. This is a really interesting and logical tool in parallel with military administrations. It turned out very mixed for us. For example, the oblast***

military administration, which is also the oblast state administration. And a lot of confusion. In the city of [name], **everything has fallen into a heap**. Since presently the current mayor is not in the territory of Ukraine but is currently in captivity. That is, we do not know where he is, he is not there. The head of the military administration is performing his duties, he **has assumed the full range of functions** [...] For me, this is a usurpation of power. Pure **usurpation of power**. But it provides an opportunity to solve some issues at a faster pace. What we need right now is right now. Maybe **in the future, a system of some kind of safeguards** will be worked out, but what we were going for was the decentralization of the process. (Man, managerial position.)

Therefore, it is necessary **to find such a balance that will not make the power** of military administrations **somehow authoritarian**. That is, there should be this public control. It should be public power, while it will be both state and public, that is, there will be some kind of successful combination. But that cannot be allowed, because the situation is very difficult now, and decisions sometimes have to be made instantly. And for me, sometimes, you know, I worked as a first deputy and I remember that when **we had to defend some decisions by deputies, to prove some kind of rightness... They didn't understand something there, because maybe they didn't want to understand something**. Now it's fast, it's optimal, it's efficient. Well, the appointed people should indeed be quite knowledgeable, professional people. Well, personnel policy, you know, is different in different places. Some kind of control is being created but for now... **It's not saying that it has to be this way round**. (Woman, managerial position.)

The war, the occupation, and the response of the local hromadas to the catastrophic situation became a moment for a critical rethinking of how local self-government works and to what extent it fulfills its functions.

Well, you see, even during the occupation, when the deputies were not visible, **people did not particularly pay attention to whether they were there or not, as they are now**. Unfortunately, it's a very bad call to

something that people don't feel, and haven't felt before, that they can put it on them. Because yes, indeed, city councils are currently not working. But we will go out with you now, we will ask someone. People do not know whether they are working or not. They are not interested in these processes. This says **they do not know who their deputy is. They don't know what the functionality is.** They don't know who to turn to. As for now, I will say this: for local councils at any level, other than the Verkhovna Rada, this is a big moment **to rethink their place in general in the management role and in the role of what they do in general.** And I will say right away, in addition to the fact that they can represent a hromada, bring humanitarian aid, or something else, this is necessary. But for the time being it may be a wish for them (so that they are right now, while they have the opportunity, before they get bogged down again in the intrigues of making decisions, profitable or not profitable, I to you and you to me and you another political history first) - **to review just for yourself, what they did before the war, what they did during the occupation, if it concerns the city of [name], and what they want to do next, apart from populist solutions. (Man, managerial position.)**

The causes of the problems of local self-government at the community level are seen both in the people in the area, who are often apolitical, do not participate in elections, and do not want to be involved in the procedures of local self-government, and in the same local people who took leadership positions and were elected by the people's representatives in the structure of self-government. People's elected representatives, having moved from the category of ordinary people to the category of "representatives of the authorities", instantly face a negative attitude towards the authorities as a whole and are forced to overcome mistrust, lack of initiative, lack of desire of ordinary people to take responsibility even for their own well-being.

*I had a small hope that people, seeing accessible communicative power, would be able to **take some responsibility upon themselves.** For the street, for the neighborhood, for the microdistrict. I had hope, but unfortunately, it didn't happen. **And it didn't happen** not because people are stupid. I*

already said that people are not used to doing something differently. People are used to it, the government is bad. Such moments give me a signal that people do not believe in the government so much, the government has already lied so much... (Man, managerial position.)

And we get such a story that for some reason people decided that way, they absolutely do not want to participate in the processes related to reconstruction. They took a position: you are the government, you do. (Man, managerial position.)

And we get such a story that for some reason people decided that way, they absolutely do not want to participate in the processes related to reconstruction. They took a position: you are the government, you do. (Man, managerial position.)

*When I came to power, I had no understanding at all of what a budget is, how it is filled, in what way it is filled, and where something is taken from. [...] And we will lay off people right now, and we will send this money even to, well, a guy, and such nonsense, in which I thought that it would be, if, but otherwise. And it **turned out that it was not so at all.** (Man, managerial position.)*

Some of my hopes or plans have partially come true. I had a plan to improve the material and technical base, I had a plan to bring young people into management. It partially came true. Partly it didn't come true, **because I had no idea how bureaucratized it all was, how brain-eating and mind-numbing it all was. Plus a huge bureaucratization of very simple processes. But I wedged myself into this bureaucratic scheme without fully understanding it.** And I thought that I would come now, just quickly, make a decision, and everything will be - well yeah, all is done, uhuh. The only one that has practical schemes is with my volunteer friends, with whom I solve very quickly, but there are few opportunities. (Man, managerial position.)

For example, the occupation, by the managers of local councils, who could just conduct **additional training for these deputies**, who will

volunteer so that when the time comes and the military administration once again transfers this problem-solving resource to local councils, they will be ready. Because they will not be ready. Now the expectation is simple. It will pass somehow, God save us, there will be no elections. I understand that very well. And then we will come and look at the budget again, we will decide how to do it. **And they don't know how it is. They did not know this in most cases. And now they don't know. They will again make decisions based on their own perception.** And not the assets and experience of other countries. And probably now would be an ideal plan to start some groups. It can be a separate project for deputies of local councils to conduct training abroad at the moment, how the parliamentary organization works and representatives of deputy corps in various European countries. (Man, managerial position.)

The reaction of the local people's representatives to the war and occupation also became a significant challenge. Individual cases of collaboration, flight abroad, and "remote" management via Zoom actively resonate with the general negative perception of the government as a whole and serve as an additional argument in the negative assessment of its representatives in the area:

If we talk specifically about [name of the settlement] territorial community, **our council secretary has become a traitor.** Council secretary! I conducted an official investigation and published many videos and photos. It's just what's coming out of his mouth right now. It was just a shock for us. And we dismissed him from his position based on the results of an official investigation. He got suspicion. **But not all deputies received suspicion.** They even, well, their activities have not been studied at all, not discussed, and so on. When the oblast military administration gave us the task of establishing contact with 20-25 of our deputies, we established contact with 16 who **confirmed their alleged willingness to work.** But this is not to work in the de-occupied territory but to **work there in Zoom, remotely, while staying abroad.** They are not going to compile the credentials. (Woman, managerial position.)

Among all other risks and tragedies, Ukraine found itself in a situation of testing the strength of its own democracy during the war. The democratic system is a construct, a set of declared values, an orientation model that has a huge number of variations and specific local manifestations. Today, we see the aggravation of a considerable number of problems related to the democratic development of the country, and polarity in assessments of the possibility of democratic development of the country. The same people talk about representatives of the authorities and their own neighbors in a negative light and at the same time demonstrate extraordinary consolidation under conditions of the direct threat to life; expect orders from management and at the same time become organizers and initiators of unique local projects to save people's lives and creators of permanent forms of mutual support. Such a situation is a significant challenge for local communities and a test for Ukrainian democracy. However, even under conditions of war, centralization of power, and collapse of local self-government, we are still talking about the level of the quality of democracy and democratic procedures, and not about the absence of democracy as such.

Human safety under conditions of war, occupation, and man-made disaster

In one of the previous researches, which was initiated by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Ukraine in 2019 and covered the territories of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts (under the control of the Ukrainian government), we found that people talk about security in its broadest sense - as human security, constructing the latter as a full-fledged functioning and adequate management of various spheres of society, which ultimately creates a sense of comfort and safeness in people.

The security model constructed by research participants in 2019 included the following components: financial security; physical safety (with an emphasis on protection from violence in everyday life); availability of quality, guaranteed, and affordable medical services; freedom of expression and protection from persecution for political or civil position; freedom of movement (which is understood rather as the ability to move freely in one's own settlement without fear of attack or aggression); full operation of the law enforcement system; the possibility of protecting honor and dignity; availability of full-fledged state services from

various aspects of life; protection against external aggression, control over arms circulation; mental safety and the “right to the future” (it’s about the possibility of a wider planning horizon)⁵.

In this research, we also see that security is perceived in a broad sense, but the war and occupation contributed to the fact that the system of priorities in the formation of the safety space was significantly transformed, and individual components of human security were also rethought.

The protection of human life comes to the fore:

Participant 1 (woman, 59 years old): Well, it’s probably more important to survive right now. Stay alive. After the hits, it is very scary. Simply! Yes, we are afraid! But the main thing is that we are alive! We are alive! We are going to work! We are smiling! We love! We help each other! Well... (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

In the conditions of war, safety is primarily associated with the **availability of bomb shelters and air defense**, which is critical for the preservation of human lives..

Now, human security means that there should be a building of the village council, administrative services center, and there should be a dungeon there. Our bomb shelter collapsed... well. It fell apart at us, it was a hit - 5 meters! We will build a two-story building here - it will be convenient for people, both employees and visitors, or it will have an elevator, we are considering it. And the main thing will be the dungeon. Well, the basement. That is, safety at work is one thing. For people, safety is — there’s no shelling, you know? It’s the same at school. So that children can come and learn. Because online learning is a bit different. And even more so when... well, I don’t know... We can talk for a long time, but human security for us is for everyone individually and for everyone together. (Man, managerial position.)

⁵ Human security: assessment and expectations of the residents of the four oblasts of Ukraine (Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson), 2020.

The second problem is human security and the safety factor in general, because before the war, all issues related to the maintenance of warehouses, shelters, and shelters were only on the shelves, it all was carried out poorly. Not because people are stupid, not because there was no budget, there were no opportunities, and there was no belief and understanding that it would be needed someday. (Man, managerial position.)

***Participant 6 (woman, 63 years old):** We don't have air defense. Unfortunately. (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)*

Related to this is the establishment of a shelling warning system. First of all, we are talking about the air raid alert, the lack of which at the beginning local residents tried to compensate by informing through their own social networks (usually several groups were created mainly in Telegram with different access circle to information):

***Participant 2 (woman, 36 years old):** They connected us with an air raid alert system - so bwe can hear.*

***Participant 3 (woman, 57 years old):** Announcement! Anatolyvna sometimes has such a situation, well, it will be difficult, Anatolyvna warns us: "Be careful! Be cautious!"*

***Participant 2:** Yes! She says, be cautious at night! (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)*

The **Ukrainian military** is also an important factor in the new security system on the ground. However, their role is interpreted ambiguously. On the one hand, they are talked about as a help, a tool for bringing order to the places:

***Participant 6 (woman, 63 years old):** Soldiers sometimes help us too. And we had a few in the village, and yes, they helped us physically. (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)*

But on the other hand, their placement in settlements is mostly considered by residents not as protection, but as an additional danger. This is due to the fact that military and ammunition warehouses are potential targets for shelling. And also with the fact that the moods among the residents of the settlement remain

different and there remains a potential threat that one of the residents will give up their positions, thereby causing fire on their own settlement.

Participant 1 (woman, 31 years old): *I think there would be those who would expose their position... And they will be...*

Participant 2 (woman, 41 years old): *It would be safer, but yes...*

Participant 5 (woman, 64 years old): *Well, now there are many soldiers in the village. A lot. And on every street.*

Participant 4 (woman, 62 years old): *There are soldiers. And warehouses, I guess, are there as well. (FGR, Kherson oblast.)*

In the context of war, which includes a significant informational component, the role of information is being reconsidered. The information field is referred to as another field of struggle, with losses and victories:

And we are losing not to Russians, we are losing to the treasonphills, we are losing to some doomspreaders, those who throw shit on the fan. We are losing to them very much. For one good news, 5-6-7 bad news and a million bad comments. (Man, managerial position.)

Under such conditions, a significant role is assigned to direct communication, but this requires the search for new forms, because in conditions of shelling, any gathering turns people into a target:

And, apparently, human security is general communication, right on the spot. I'm not talking about all these briefings, telecasts - it's all bullshit, it's nonsense. I'm talking specifically at the local level, because, look, how can I now set up communication with the community if I don't have the right to hold gatherings? How? How can I hear the community? Here I am in Novorontsovka, in all of Novorontsovka I can't carry out a meeting anywhere. Even in a shelter. How can I hear the community? And it is also about human security. (Man, managerial position.)

However, it is also the right to receive professional and useful information, while people are mostly faced with soothing information noise from pseudo-experts

and are completely helpless in the face of a techgenic disaster without any safety protocols, professional information about the necessary measures, etc.

Participant 9 (man, 67 years old): *Information. To receive information timely. Very little information! And we suffered from the flooding - just because there was not enough information! Even the information was harmful! Well, people were misled. That it will not get us! There... Well, in short. It has been calculated since the Soviet Union - what kind of flooding will occur in the event of an accident. And yet these documents are there somewhere. If people were told, everything would be different! At least they'd save the property! Well, I'm already 67 years old! And I happen to need to start life from the beginning. It's difficult. (FGR, Kherson oblast.)*

Participant 7 (man, 66 years old): *I think, first of all, maybe I'm wrong? First of all, it was not necessary to call journalists here, but the Ministry of Emergency Situations. Transport. To take people away. (FGR, Kherson oblast.)*

Participant 9 (man, 67 years old): *Yes! People were misinformed. It was said that the water would already recede in the evening. And it arrived 2 or 3 days later. (FGR, Kherson region.)*

Participant 5 (woman, 64 years old): *I was watering until 5 in the evening! The water is flowing, but it is running along the river! I watch how the water runs, and I record every hour I walk! I take pictures with my phone. bridges were floating. Reed was floating by. And I have a line running - I'm going to change the hose. I was watering. And then, when the sons came and said: "Ma? What are you doing! Do you see what is happening? Let's get packed!" - "What are you saying! I still need to water raspberries!" - "It's needed to turn on brains! No need to water anything! Pack up and get out!" - people need to be told this! (FGR, Kherson oblast.)*

The space itself, filled with instruments of murder - mines, projectiles - becomes dangerous for people. Despite informing the public about possible dangers, the possibility of error and careless behavior remains high:

Then there are other problems related to the war, which, unfortunately, people do not understand basic security factors. For example, you mustn't take all kinds of junk home, you mustn't take pictures, post them or do anything at all, everything related to the war... A boy died because he put an unexploded cassette shell in his pocket and parted. And this is about the fact that he knew what he was picking up, he took the projectile, because the second boy who went with him, he remained alive, without a leg or something like that. And he says: we just found it, a projectile, we wanted to bring it home. (Man, managerial position.)

The next components of the construct of human security were its sound and time dimensions. In our conversations with research participants, this sounded like the right to silence. The following quote illustrates this sound dimension of danger well. The sounds of explosions and alerts take away people's sense of peace not only at the moment when they sound. Waiting for these sounds to repeat itself is scary, and it makes the silence both desirable and dangerous at the same time. Temporary silence does not solve the security problem, limits a person in everything - in communication, rest, drives people into basements and other closed spaces, which give a feeling of temporary protection and an opportunity to regain strength.

Participant 3 (woman, 57 years old): *Security is, in my understanding, silence. So that there were no such explosions. So that there was no shooting. Missiles were not flying above us. There is silence. That would be safety.*

Interviewer: Yes. Does silence mean sound?

Participant 3: *Yes.*

Participant 1 (woman, 59 years old): *The silence is also alarming. You sit and think, oh! [...]*

Participant 8 (woman, 49 years old): *Quietly, quietly, we are getting used to it, and then the slightest sound - that's it! Hands are already trembling, legs! I hold them, and they do it on themselves - that's all! It is same for our children. Our little boy went outside in the evening, it must have been*

half past ten, it was probably a month ago... And there, too, there was an explosion somewhere - and he comes in, we sit down to dinner, he says: "Well, I guess I don't want..." And his hands. "Sit down and eat!" And it's like that, a spoon like that... The child is 14 years old! I look at him - I cry! Because... My children have been sleeping since May 10, if they slept at all, it's been almost four months now, they slept four nights in the house - that would be good! [...] I feel sorry for them! I say: "Well, you breathe that filth!", "Well, it's better for us here! At least we got some sleep and gained fresh strength..." And he is working, and she is with the baby, and her little one is there too. Because sometimes I'm there, and sometimes I'm at home. And every time they go there, I feel a lump in my throat. Because I understand that there is no peace for children. (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

Participant 3 (woman, 42 years old): *Well, because of the war! Safety now... I see it all - security...*

Participant 6 (woman, 40 years old): *As it flies above us, you sit and think... God! Let it pass by!*

Participant 3: *How they bring them! I see the wounded being brought in. I work at a local hospital.*

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant 3: *Safety is far away now. Every day is a joy for us.*

Participant 5 (woman, 64 years old): *Yes! I had a great day - thank you! (FGR, Kherson oblast.)*

The time dimension of security is as important as its sound dimension. Life in anticipation of shelling, life in basements, without the ability to maintain the previous way of life - these are losses that cannot be compensated for, just as it is impossible to compensate for the life lost due to death. The temporal dimension of security includes a temporal perspective, the ability to plan for the future. Under the conditions of war, people's lives seem to be on pause - therefore, we are talking about temporary losses that concern not only the present, but also the future - this is an incomplete education, unplanned life strategies, unrealized

career or family plans, etc.

***Participant 5 (woman, 64 years old):** Yes! So that we feel really free. And independent. So that we can plan. Could live. Could know. Not to be afraid. This is this fear, this fear that people had... People are afraid now. He is telling the truth. That we lie down and sleep with one eye open. If you can call it sleep. And so that people have confidence in tomorrow, in work. So that people have confidence that they are giving birth to children - that these children will grow up. In peace And not like that Sofiyka who died on the 23rd day! Together with mom, dad and brother. It's terrible! Confidence and safety. Peace. (FGR, Kherson oblast.)*

Human security... Confidence in tomorrow. Exclusively. Confidence in tomorrow. Okay. Well, in your near future. This includes the fact that tomorrow I will have something to eat, that tomorrow I will wake up, that both two legs, both two arms, the head will be on one body, and not scattered at different corners. This is so that I can meet my colleagues. This is so I can meet my friends. And I have someone to rely on. And this is the fact that I know that any system, both government and non-government, that is, both the private sector and the civil sector are working constantly, and I will be able to receive one or another service, both of a personal nature and of a public nature. (Man, managerial position.)

Under the conditions of active hostilities, people faced the problem of **access to food**. However, this period did not last long and, accordingly, did not have a very acute character - it manifested itself more at the level of fears. The reaction to this danger was quite different. Since it is a rural area in the south of Ukraine, with deep-rooted practices of stockpiling food due to the transmission of the experience of the Holodomor to generations, some people felt confident and could afford independence from, for example, humanitarian aid organized by the Russian occupiers or payments to the local population:

***Participant 9 (male, 67 years old):** I didn't take a coin. I never took their humanitarian aid. That's exactly why - because of them. Ira used to bring it - so yes, I took it there a couple of times. But that was already later, in my*

opinion... [...] Well, in short, the conversation turned out to be such that “It is necessary receive! What, you don’t get a pension?”. I say: “I don’t receive it. And I’m not going to get it.” They say: “You will die of hunger! – “In the village? I won’t die. If I’m not lazy, I actually have everything. I can do it for a year or two...” Well, maybe we were lucky there – we got the grain. What to do with that grain, since there was no bread – we would ground the grain, sifted it with a grain mill, and baked bread from it, from this bran. (FGR, Kherson oblast.)

Participant 5 (woman, 64 years old): It was very difficult. But the most terrible thing was, nevertheless, girls, not bread! The most terrible thing was the wait! That at any moment the gate will open and they will come to you with a machine gun. (FGR, Kherson oblast.)

Participant 5 (woman, 64 years old): I, for example, have never gone for bread. When they gave out half a loaf, or a loaf, or not at all, I baked for myself and survived. It wasn’t terrible. But what was terrible is when they came and, well, it turns out, they didn’t let us into the house, but two children were there. And they came in with machine guns – they started asking the children: “Where does your dad work? Where is that...” Well, we already knew before that, we said before that “he works on a construction site.” And not in the pre-trial detention center in Kherson. But my mother was very scared. (FGR, Kherson oblast.)

In connection with the destruction of houses due to shelling and the forced relocation of people from war zones, **access to housing** has become part of the human security problem. The full-scale war has actualized all those issues that have remained unresolved since 2014 – the specific nature of the rental housing market, which continues to leave both homeowner and tenant vulnerable; lack of social housing, which could smooth out the problems of the shadow and partly unmanaged rental market:

The biggest crisis problem is our residential fund. Almost no way. Because even before the war, we did not have normal rented real estate. Because there was no such culture of renting real estate. It was necessary to ask,

beg, persuade somewhere. And now, when there is a war, plus military personnel, innerly relocate people, and plus huge mistrust, because during active hostilities a certain category of military personnel caused trouble, and now we, for our part, want to solve this issue, to create social housing. We have two objects. One facility was a technical school dormitory. For a long time it stood as a ruin, a wasteland. We are polishing it now, we want to install windows. And the second is the maternity ward of the hospital. It is closed, but there are rooms, there is a shower, there is a toilet, everything is there, you just have to pull it together. But again, limited resources, money is needed for everything. (Man, managerial position.)

As the experience of forced relocation back in 2014 clearly demonstrated, community integration of forcibly displaced people and people who have lost their homes is impossible without solving the interrelated basic problems. A person cannot rent a home if he does not have either financial assistance sufficient for this or a job. However, war, occupation, forced migration of people led to the degradation of the economy. Almost all research participants noted that they faced the **problem of unemployment**.

A huge level of unemployment, because there are no jobs, in fact. Our largest employer today is the village council. The largest employer. That is, we have no workshops, no factories, no plants, no gas stations, there are shops where three or four people work - and, most importantly, officially. And there is a huge need to create jobs. (Man, managerial position.)

Access to **medical services** has also become limited. People have to take care of getting to the hospitals and doctors they need. Emergency care is available sporadically and only thanks to military medics:

Ambulance - unfortunately, we could not achieve it. Our emergency service, which is based in [name of the locality], is available from morning to 8 p.m. All! Next, [name of the settlement] is coming. Fortunately, we have military medics here, they will be there as soon as they arrive - they have ambulances. They provided help more than once. (Man, managerial position.)

The experience of being under occupation or on the front line of shelling also exacerbated **mental health** issues. Accordingly, when talking about human safety, the research participants talk about the traumatization of people, about the need to see this problem and work with it now. Therefore, mental safety also occupies an important place in the construction of human security.

Many people do not understand their trauma. And, not understanding this trauma, they pass through themselves all received, all received information, no matter how, through the negative prism. (Man, managerial position.)

What, well here, from the local self-government - well, a third of the powers, and everything else - like that, you know? Overcoming the consequences. This is what we understand... This is psychologically very difficult. And here you have to be such a psychologist with people, calm down. (Man, managerial position.)

Understanding human security from the perspective of war and man-made disaster adds another interesting dimension to everything indicated above – the restoration of normality, the usual way of life. For a long time in mined areas, people will not be able to pick mushrooms, due to the explosion of the Kakhovka HPP, people will no longer have access to fishing (both as a hobby and as a fishery); not soon new fruit trees will grow in the flooded yards, which will lack water for irrigation; there will never be old places for warm family gatherings in completely destroyed houses; the photographic memory of families will never be restored without the photo archives destroyed during the shelling. It is an understanding of a future lost forever that could have been but will never happen again:

***Participant 6 (woman, 63 years old):** Summer was just coming, the river from the Kakhovskyi Reservoir, this was the place where we spent our time. Whoever had more money, as they say, went to the seas. Well, that's it now! There is no one!*

***Participant 1 (woman, 59 years old):** We had a river sea - and we lost it! (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)*

***Participant 9 (man, 57 years old):** And it came to us in three days. In three days! How much water there was!*

Participant 8 (woman, 49 years old): We all watched and cried!

Participant 9: Yes! Before my eyes!

Participant 2 (woman, 36 years old): We went to have a look, yes. Crayfish were lying. Right under the tails, with the little ones, we were saving... Those poor vipers... (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

Participant 8 (woman, 49 years old): Everyone was crying. Probably a month. And now. It has already turned green. And there it was, this unpleasant smell. It rose when it was hot and windy - so straight that the fog stood like that. And the stench was so bad... We thought we would suffocate and there was nowhere to escape. You enter the house, close the door to the street... (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

Participant 1 (woman, 59 years old): Everything burned down. We don't have water. There was only drinking water..

Participant 2 (woman, 36 years old): There is no harvest in the garden. Not on a tree. Not under the tree. It's a pity...

Interviewer: And the trees dry?

Participant 2: Of course!

Participant 8 (woman, 49 years old): Apples, we used to water. There are even the those little flowers there, or a potato - and it all caused the apples to grow. And now the apples are all even beaten by some kind of rust. Somehow they are so twisted, deformed... And they fall. Totally.

Interviewer: Yes.

Participant 8: Everything is on fire. That's it... In autumn, people usually plant garlic. I have always donr like that. We already had technical water, somewhere until October, somewhere until October 15 or until the end. I look at when it rains, then there water comes earlier... If there is no rain, then it lasts until November... Everyone tried to water. Oh, watered - then the land was cultivated and garlic was planted. I don't know now. We have

■ such a land that it takes...

■ **Participant 1:** *You can't dig a spade.*

■ **Participant 8:** *It's as if it was cement. Without water, I don't know what we will do. (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)*

In other words, everyone had their own comfort zone, but it was completely lost. And it won't be like that anymore. Everything changes in people absolutely. If in a year, for example, in six months, hostilities end and peaceful life and recovery begin, then the life of an average [local resident] will no longer be the same, he will not spend his time like this, because we have fishing, for example, hiking to the forest, a trip to the sea, to the beach or all those things, these perks [of local residents], they will be unavailable to us. And our mentality will change because you had your usual life, and now it'll be absent. Well, I have a summer house on [name of the area], and it has been under water for 4 months, and I have been planting Christmas trees, lawns and so on there for 15 years. And I had a tradition every year on the anniversary of our wedding, I buy a cool Christmas tree of some kind, rare, and we plant it there. And we had a tradition, it will no longer exist. We will not have a tradition there for the weekend, as soon as there is an opportunity to come there to weed and mow the lawn. As autumn begins, these are mushrooms. This will not happen. This will not happen in 5-10 years. Yes, people will walk, they will explode and they will continue to walk, but we will not go. And so is everything else. That's all, we lost the most valuable thing - and it is not even housing. Because it will be possible to restore it, they will give us money from reparations, something else, America, Europe will give us something. We will rebuild housing, but we will be rebuilding our normal life for a very long time. (Man, managerial position.)

Resilience of hromadas and cohesion of the society

After the start of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian society demonstrated an extraordinary level of cohesion and ability to respond to the challenges of war in a matter of hours, unlike most international organizations, which had a certain bureaucratic inertia in responding, as well as a number of security restrictions that did not allow them to continue their humanitarian activities under the conditions war.

And here we see a paradoxical situation: people who mostly negatively evaluate the representatives of the authorities elected by themselves, their own neighbors or situational and conditional “strangers” (forced migrants, representatives of businesses working under the conditions of occupation, people who take money and humanitarian aid from occupiers and others), – in extreme conditions, they become situational or permanent volunteers, find unexpected solutions, demonstrate fantastic togetherness, the ability to join forces with representatives of the authorities, business structures, the public sector and international organizations, and are ready to save others despite a direct threat to life.

Its influence is hard to overestimate. And at the initial stage, when volunteers brought food, medicine and everything else. Then, when there was flooding, there were also volunteers, who were forced to provide this help secretly, because any volunteer activity, of course, was targeted by the occupiers and people could suffer a lot for it. [...] There are a lot of volunteers. There is a lot of support, help, food products, diapers right now, I see what is being put out, and sometimes, as we knew, something was given as a donation. That is, they issue maps for those people who live in the occupation, they know where to buy, give to the elderly or people with reduced mobility. Well, in another word, this is the lion's share of public support, it belongs to volunteers. (Woman, managerial position.)

We did, indeed, suggest to people, if there is an opportunity, you are ready to put your strength into doing it. Because we immediately said: no one sees your work. That is, no one will ever see your feat. This is very hard work, and if you are ready to join us in this, then we are welcoming you onboard. A lot of people got though, so yes. And then the core has already

been formed, and now I have everything that works, there are four guys somewhere, who started working with us from the very beginning, back in November, they are working. (Man, managerial position.)

It also forced people to seek forms of help, to create secure communication systems, to mobilize their knowledge and social connections, and to provide help despite high risks.

During the flooding, we also could not legalize ourselves and our activities in all the chats, we even created those chats, Telegram channels, I cannot write on my own behalf, because we know exactly what is there, so to speak, assigned people who will immediately be there about something... We wrote with their hands, gave messages, and people were evacuated. And to the right bank (we can talk about it now), although indeed the price for it was sometimes high, but it was like that - various reports were made, because even elementary, even to bury people - people did not know how and where, because there were hidden cemeteries, they did not know their actions, but we did it all with the hands of volunteers. (Woman, managerial position.)

Interviewer: Well, life of hromada, from the 24th, wasn't it paralyzed or disorganized?

Participants: No, no.

Interviewer: Products? School? Social services?

Participants: Yes, yes! Everything works.

Interviewer: Kindergarten?

Participant 8 (woman, 49 years old): Yes!

Interviewer: Were all services provided?

Participant 8: Yes! I'm a social worker, I know anyway... I'm here, I'll run to my elderly ladies, maybe there is a need for something? And water. And that, and that! And that's the hromada. Both coal and firewood. The funds also brought all kinds of briquettes and heating stoves. All! It was

*organized, we provide lists of people... Everything works. I help everything.
(FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)*

People often do not realize their own role and contribution to the stability and cohesion of the community, perceiving their activities as routine everyday life:

Interviewer: Okay. And were there any people who were able to calm or organize people? In a positive way. I mean, to somehow increase the feeling of security, taking into account all that was happening.

Participants: *No, there were not.*

Participant 1 (woman, 59 years old): *In the same way, for the children for a new year. Gifts and entertainment were organized for the children, it turns out...*

Interviewer: So you organized it?

Participant 1: *Yes.*

Interviewer: It turns out, after all, there were people who were engaged? Or was it exclusively for your family?

Participant 1: *No. I am mostly for those with many children, disabled children, mostly like that. And then... When it worked - for all children. When it didn't work out, then I was told which categories - for example families with many children... And that's it! For example, this is how it was
(FGR, Kherson oblast.)*

For people who find themselves in the epicenter of social and technogenic disasters, volunteers cease to be external agents. Volunteer activity is understood as its own function, a natural reaction to help the needy and rescue the victims.

Participant 6 (woman, 63 years old): *People have changed. There are some people for whom humanitarian aid is above anything else. This is the way it is. But at the same time, they resonate with us. When we bury the dead, it is sacred for them. And funds. Say, we needed a bed linen in the hospital for our military - people collected... And for the first two months - they just carried, probably, all their last! One of them says: "I brought all the*

bedding here. All! Well, I will buy another one after the war! May it be useful to someone." Well, Lena humbled herself... (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

Participant 6 (woman, 63 years old): 167 military men stopped by us at once. We cooked food and fed them three times a day. And guys from [name of settlement] came it, using the transport they managed to, they brought their cars here late at night. We had to post an announcement that if you see something strange for you somewhere, calmly pass by and accept it. And that's how we have been for a year and a half - they come, they leave, we meet again. Well, people, here they are, people share theirs. Even in such difficult times, they help each other!

Participant 8 (woman, 49 years old): And the guys are bathing, I have one in my neighborhood, and they wash everything for the soldiers! (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

Participant 8 (woman, 49 years old): We had, let's see, when there were shellings, too! Everyone helped. Some brought 100, some 50! So that people collect on windows and roofs! This is thanks to these, totally... (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

Participant 6 (woman, 63 years old): We always have a volunteer named [surname] who goes there to the boys, to the front line of defense. Our people are constantly baking something, frying something, sewing something, these pads, you know!

Participant 1 (woman, 59 years old): Home canning, yes! Homemade salo. I deal with chickens - chickens go there. Pies, briefly speaking, Anatolivna is there...

Participant 6 (woman, 63 years old): And he says that "Malokaterinivka is so, oh, so soulful! The one who gives, as they say, the last shirt is taken off!" (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

I mean that when we had flooding, when de-occupation, when occupation, people consolidated, perceived their needs to a lesser extent and were

directed to the outside, for help. We can see on the example of other cities that are far from the contact line, where, unfortunately, everything that is carried out, rocket strikes, "shaheds" fly in and those tragedies happen, then in these cities society does not need to tell a mayor or another one "come, help» and so on. People gather, people understand, people are ready to come personally with their hands, without shovels, without anything, to clean up debris and so on. Yes, it's not long, it's the first two or three days, four days. But it still speaks of consolidation in any case. (Man, managerial position.)

The common experience of surviving the war and occupation activated the phenomenon of neighborhood, which smoothed the former divisions and allowed to include in the community those who lived in the neighborhood before the war, but were not perceived as "their own", as well as newcomers:

Participant 8 (woman, 49 years old): *A woman left Oleksandr with her children. It has been there for a year and a half. Well, how! He has not seen his family for a year and a half. Alone as a wolf! We are neighbors. We are neighbors, so we try to help each other in whatever way we can. And we hold on. We need to - let's run to him in the basement. (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)*

Participant 9 (man, 67 years old): *I would say that I have become a little friendlier. We survived and... Well, let's say, I haven't lived in the village that long. Well, somehow it turned out that way, I was considered here as a summer resident, one might say. Well, there were occasions: "Where do you live?" — "Naberezhnaya" — "Ah! Summer residents!" Well, although, basically, I lived here, not as a summer resident - but normally. The way all people live. And after that, they accepted me more in the village. They began to communicate with me more, and this one. I believe that this is a positive move. (FGR, Kherson oblast.)*

Participant 3 (woman, 57 years old): *Yes! Our neighbors are also immigrants, from Orikhiv. What is needed... Well, now they have left, that is, after May 10 - they have three children, they have left, they are afraid.*

Whatever is needed, I will help. We are neighbors. Who could do that. Do you need a bicycle pump? Welcome. Do you need plates, not enough? Or the jars for conservation – here you go. We helped! And yes, I helped them with vegetables that year. People came, did not sow anything – had nothing. (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

When talking about their local community, people call themselves a hromads and compare relationships in it with family bonds. The experience of aid fascinates and motivates people to extend the scope of good deeds to those in need but not directly affected by the war. So those social problems that were previously ignored become visible:

Participant 1 (woman, 59 years old): *In the hromada. Yes! We have all become like that. We are one family. We have one there, a hairdresser lives there, a hairdresser works, Yana... One family was left alone, well, it was a dysfunctional family, the mother died, the father was left with the child. And she took it and said: "I will take it every Sunday, do his haircut, wash his clothes!" Only him! Not dad! Bathe him!" She gave herself this word, our Yana. She gave this child a bath and laundry day just yesterday. (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)*

Participant 6 (female, 63 years old): *We raised 159,000! From people-volunteers. And we immediately, immediately carried out the repair of such, very damaged, with these funds, that's all! Installed very quickly! (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)*

Participant 8 (woman, 49 years old): *People collected it.*

Participant 6 (woman, 63 years old): *People and hromada. And the hromada gave! Just for us, our deputy, Katya, who brought us a lot of building materials, slate, wood, and QSB bars. Very well done! Good girl!*

Participant 8: *We also have men, guys. That's how she called out – they all came together and everyone helped.*

Participant 6: *For free. During the month. Twenty, fifteen each. We fed them in the dining room. Everyone got together, everyone was friendly. As*

soon as they heard the announcement - they gathered and worked until late in the evening. (FGR, Zaporizhzhia oblast.)

Under the conditions of occupation, local residents managed to find hybrid forms of activity that did not allow the occupied territories to completely leave the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian state. A significant role here was played by business structures that worked with previous suppliers and found new ones, tried to legalize their activities under both laws (Ukraine and the Russian Federation), or, on the contrary, became completely illegal.

Equally important were the newly created aid groups, which combined the principles of the state structure and public association and worked out specific procedures for restoring access to Ukrainian state services for people who found themselves in territories not under the control of the Ukrainian government.

Participant 5 (woman, 64 years old): *It's just the beginning. At first there were products. And then they started carrying their goods. And then many of our entrepreneurs opened up. And they started trading. And sell. They also sold alcohol. They traded all possible goods And they imported it all. They, all this was given the go-ahead. And for everything. And all this was sold.*

Participant 9 (man, 67 years old): *And I think that it is right, to make all work. Because people stayed together. Where to buy it? What is needed... This is only gratitude for them, for the fact that they supported [...]*

Participant 5: *The prices were crazy! Well, again... Our people survived - they went to take Russian money. And that's all! And again, let them take it - they used this money to buy food for people. (FGR, Kherson oblast.)*

In the process of working here, we also worked with those who remained in the city of Kherson [...]. I mean public association, hubs and so on, whom we trusted. And we also helped them with the provision of medicines that came to us from health care institutions. And I will say that we also transferred this by act, and even those who became later collaborators, they were forced to sign our acts with a seal. We also have their signatures.

They didn't really want to, but they put seals without an emblem, but according to Ukrainian legislation, that is, for documents. We scanned it all, downloaded it. This was a service of its own. We have developed our own security algorithms. It was loaded on remote disks, unloaded on the "big land", we demolished everything again, then started again, that is, it was such a moment. But in connection with the fact that we worked it out, we knew how it works, and, unfortunately, somewhere at the beginning of autumn, we actually remained the only structure that was able to do something in the city of Kherson, state, I mean, Ukrainian legislation in the city of Kherson in general. Therefore, we sometimes lobbied the interests of our people who were directly in the temporarily occupied territory before the state bodies in Ukraine, that is, through electronic petitions. We succeeded in this. I want to pay tribute to the fact that the people who were there and accepted these documents, even the Minister of Social Policy, we constantly communicated, sent them letters. This was related to pension provision, it was related to the problematic issues of social benefits of various kinds, what we are facing here, how it can be solved. And I will say that they were on their way, which means, it was also a risk on their part, because they did not know who was working on the other side in the city of Kherson, on our behalf there and so on. (Man, managerial position.)

Another important point is that under these conditions, people realized the working mechanism, functionality and stability of horizontal communication, which was actually one of the expected results of decentralization.

In other words, each working unit, I mean a specialist, can take responsibility, make correct conclusions, forecast and so on. I will say right away, I have no subordinates, they are all my colleagues, because we are on the same level. And we know what everyone does and why. Why, for example, I sit in the office and give some instructions. Not because I'm some big boss, a brilliant person, no. Because this work also has to be done by someone, someone has to calculate salaries, someone has to conduct receptions, but we have joint decision-making and encouragement of

those directions that are promising. If it's even just an ordinary fighter, they rely on him, he's given the right resource to be able to implement the technology that he thinks will work, and we all agree with him, then he rises to other levels. Just like that, by position he remains the chief specialist. Or, in fact, it becomes a manager for a separate direction, he goes to negotiations, he gains additional experience. For me, as a state structure, this is very beneficial, because then we get not just a performer of such and other tasks, but a really thinking person who can move further horizontally and vertically. And, without a doubt, this is a very effective system. [...] I will say that I am very happy for those who surrounded me, my colleagues. Because it was precisely thanks to their work, exactly thanks to their approach, that we were able to hold through calmly, relatively calmly during the occupation. There were difficulties, but I will say that even if I fell, the system would still work autonomously. (Man, managerial position.)

Horizontal interactions exist not only within individual organizations, but also between key actors at the local level. Active cooperation of representatives of local authorities, local businesses, public organizations and volunteer groups helps to correctly redistribute efforts and make aid more effective:

A local volunteer organization, one of the most powerful volunteers in [name of locality], has almost ceased its activities in the community. They have now all switched to the front. This just clearly shows that we fulfill our function and they do not need to help us, as it was in case, for example, with 2022. (Man, managerial position.)

We have an effective business that helps, that at the meeting, where someone can even lend us something. That is, we had such a moment that the treasury missed payments for two months at a time. And we have businessmen who came to meet us, and understood the circumstances, and gave us a conditional loan, or allowed some cargo to be placed there on their territory, or gave their loaders for use. There are such entrepreneurs, there is such a business, which is active, which is responsible and understands that we must be together. There is a business that has completely separated

itself, that they do not ask anything from us - and we do not ask anything from them. (Man, managerial position.)

There are deputies whom you ask - they do it, they themselves do not become active, but if you say that we have a birdhouse in the neighborhood, we just have to walk around the people, and that birdhouse is in the countryside and there is no road there - so then they walk around the people... (Man, management position.)

The experiences of resistance and resilience gained during the occupation are reinterpreted and perceived as an important change that has implications not only for the community itself. People are aware of the scale of events and emphasize the value of their own experience for the whole world. Moreover, possible uniting to solve common problems or issues of collective security is not talked about as a potential opportunity, but as an existing experience that can be repeated in the future despite all the existing challenges.

*I do not know. I would just like to believe that when we return to the left bank, that we will feel, you know, somewhere in my soul there is still such fear. In general, I can say with confidence that we are all, we are ready, everything, but I still cannot help but say that I want to feel the support of everyone, the support of society in general, the Ukrainian people, in that we will not be there alone, and many people who will come will offer their shoulder, and we **will once again demonstrate to the world this unity of ours that did not allow us to be broken during the full-scale invasion, and we will demonstrate it during the reconstruction.** Since I realize how difficult it will be. I saw how difficult it was in Bucha, but a month and almost two years are different calendar terms. It will be many times and hundreds of times more difficult. Therefore, I think that it will not just be my duty or those people who work. This will be our joint effort, you know, to rebuild the left bank, which is simply drowning in tears in reality. (Woman, managerial position.)*

The resilience of hromadas and their ability to resist in the southern Ukrainian context has a paradoxical nature. When the decentralization reform is discussed as a state policy, and local government representatives are seen as a component of the general state management system, people perceive and evaluate the AH negatively, talk about the “imposition” of these reforms, their needlessness, the appearance of numerous hurdles, that make life difficult. On the other hand, in a critical situation of social and/or technogenic catastrophe, the same community (which began to refer to itself as a “hromada” in everyday communication) is capable of greater consolidation of efforts (some good deeds give rise to others), building horizontal interactions, demonstrates a high level of cohesion, readiness to help anyone in need without expecting gratitude and despite the direct threat to life.

Awareness of one’s own experience of stability and unity prompts people to talk about it as a phenomenon of a planetary, world nature. Despite the recognition of all the challenges of such a union in the future, it is not talked about as a theoretical possibility, but as a practice based on previous experience, which is quite possible to be repeated in the future.





