

# Post-conflict Reconstruction in Ukraine: Challenges and Opportunities

by Silvia Samorè

During her first visit to Kyiv on 21 February 2023, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni reassured President Volodymyr Zelensky concerning the Italian commitment to the Ukrainian resistance and defence against the Russian invasion. To most people's surprise, she stated that "we [Prime Minister Meloni and President Zelensky] have spoken a lot today about reconstruction, not only for when the conflict ends, but also now".<sup>1</sup> As a concrete follow-up on this commitment, on 26 April a bilateral conference on Ukraine's reconstruction was held in Rome.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the word "reconstruction" in reference to Ukraine has been used since the spring of 2022 at the EU level. This is a great achievement for the post-conflict researchers' community and research centres that have restlessly highlighted the importance of dealing with conflict and post-conflict as a complex spectrum, where recovery considerations need to be taken into account from the early stages. When designing international efforts for physical reconstruction and investment, emerging challenges to good governance and rule of law, such as corruption, must be carefully considered and managed. Furthermore, it is paramount to discuss also non-physical aspects of reconstruction, encompassing all the threats to human security, such as the presence of small arms and light weapons (SALW), that could foster instability in the country after the end of the war.

<sup>1</sup> Italian Government, *President Meloni's Statement at the Press Conference with President Zelensky*, 21 February 2023, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/21872>.

<sup>2</sup> Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Joint Communiqué between Italy and Ukraine on the Occasion of the Conference on the Reconstruction of Ukraine*, 26 April 2023, <https://www.esteri.it/en/?p=100080>.

*Silvia Samorè was formerly a pan-European fellow at the Rome Office of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), and is currently an associate researcher at the Post Conflict Operations Study Centre, Turin.*

## *Physical reconstruction and investment: Managing the risk of corruption*

The European Union and G7 countries have already conducted some rounds of discussion on Ukraine's reconstruction. In July 2022, for instance, they gathered in Lugano for the first Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC) after the war started.<sup>3</sup> This event belongs to a long series of URCs that have been held in different cities since 2017, to address the structural challenges affecting Ukrainian political and economic life. In October 2022, the "International Expert Conference on the Recovery, Reconstruction and Modernisation of Ukraine" took place in Berlin. Furthermore, since May 2022, the EU has declared the intention to create a "Ukraine reconstruction platform" to streamline international efforts to rebuild Ukraine: this entity, however, kicked off only in January 2023. The latest initiative took place in London on 21–22 June 2023, as part of the URC series of events.<sup>4</sup> One of the main themes discussed was private sector engagement in the recovery, as the majority of funding has so far come from the European Commission and the European Investment Bank. Private investments still face many barriers, first of all, the financial risk of being involved in a war-torn country. The Ukrainian government is indeed trying

to introduce the necessary reforms, including anti-corruption measures, and implement financial instruments to improve confidence in the country among investors.

Overall, the current approach of international donors could be problematic as long as it is mainly focused on the physical reconstruction and on investment, while not being accompanied by proper oversight mechanisms. Previous post-conflict endeavours have shown that this approach has the potential to be extremely harmful, as the experience in Afghanistan has painfully taught. In that instance, according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report "Corruption in Conflict", in fact, the systemic embezzlement and bribery within the host nation's institutions contributed a great deal to the failure of the recovery process.<sup>5</sup>

This will probably not be the case for Ukraine, provided that the legitimate Ukrainian government will still be in place at the end of the war, that adequate security guarantees will be offered to Kyiv at the international level and that anti-corruption efforts will guarantee a better use of aid funds. It is however impossible to deny the risk of major diversions in the destination of aid, as evidenced by some episodes of corruption at the governmental level that led to the resignation and firing

<sup>3</sup> Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, *Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC2022) in Lugano*, last updated on 3 May 2023, <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/fdfa/aktuell/dossiers/urc2022-lugano.html>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ukraine Recovery Conference, 21-22 June 2023, London, UK*, <https://www.urc-international.com/urc-2023-info>.

<sup>5</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Corruption in Conflict. Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2016, <https://www.sigarmil.com/interactive-reports/corruption-in-conflict/index.html>.

of members of the government in January 2023.<sup>6</sup> This is why the current international approach – primarily focused on donations and funding – might be hazardous; to complement this, the EU in particular should invest more in the implementation of monitoring and oversight bodies as a priority in the reconstruction effort.

Some projects aiming to empower Ukrainian civil society as an oversight actor already exist, although not at the institutional level. For example, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) has recently launched the Supervising and Monitoring Ukraine's Reconstruction Funds (SMURF) project, an initiative meant to support Ukrainian civil society in the efficient oversight of international aid allocation. The main activity consists in a study tour aimed to connect Ukrainian anti-corruption experts, civil society activists and journalists with policy-makers and research communities in the EU and the UK as well as enhance local skills in financial crimes investigation.<sup>7</sup> Empowering civil society organisations is certainly paramount, but more concrete tools, such as digital platforms collecting open data on financial flows dedicated to reconstruction, would strengthen the effectiveness of international

and local oversight bodies. This is what for instance the Ukrainian civil society coalition RISE (Reconstruction Integrity, Sustainability and Efficiency) proposed in December 2022 in line with the Lugano declaration. This project is for the moment yet to be discussed and hopefully implemented.<sup>8</sup>

### *Towards an all-encompassing approach*

The international community has gained experience in the art of building peace after war, an art it has not always been able to manage perfectly. Lessons from the last twenty years of post-conflict reconstruction missions suggest that all the consequences of war should be considered, not only the merely physical ones.

Reconstruction, in fact, should be conceived as a long-term process, addressing both material and non-material damage caused by conflict. Moreover, as has been highlighted, it should be “broadly understood as a complex, holistic and multidimensional process encompassing effort to simultaneously improve military (restoration of law and order), political (governance), economic (rehabilitation and development) and social conditions (justice and reconciliation)”.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Tara Law, “What to Know about the Corruption Scandals Sweeping Ukraine’s Government”, in *Time*, updated on 1 February 2023, <https://time.com/6249941>.

<sup>7</sup> Royal United Services Institute, “Project Launches to Monitor and Supervise Ukraine’s Reconstruction Funds”, in *RUSI News*, 13 December 2022, <https://www.rusi.org/news-and-comment/rusi-news/project-launches-monitor-and-supervise-ukraines-reconstruction-funds>.

<sup>8</sup> RISE Ukraine Coalition, *Institutional Architecture of Ukraine’s Recovery: Proposals by RISE Ukraine*, 29 November 2022, <https://www.rise.org.ua/blog/discussion-paper-the-institutional-architecture-of-reconstruction-proposals-of-rise-ukraine-coalition>.

<sup>9</sup> Nikolaos Tzifakis, “Post-Conflict Economic Reconstruction”, in *Encyclopedia Princetoniensis*, <https://pesd.princeton.edu/node/586>.

In an attempt to identify how this framework could be adapted to the Ukrainian environment, some considerations can already be drawn. First of all, the Russian invasion caused a mass humanitarian crisis. According to the UN human rights agency, at least 6,952 civilians were killed in Ukraine between February 2022 and January 2023,<sup>10</sup> but this figure is likely a substantial underestimation, with Ukrainian government sources ranging between 33,000 and 41,000 civilians killed and the battle over Mariupol alone leading to an estimated 25,000 civilian deaths.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, according to the UNHCR data portal, as of 26 June 2023, over 5,977,000 refugees from Ukraine were recorded across Europe,<sup>12</sup> presumably the continuation of the state of emergency and war in their country will make it increasingly hard for many of them to return and rebuild their lives in a future peaceful Ukraine.

Population loss, which has been quantified at -16 per cent in the next two decades in the best-case scenario and up to -33 per cent in the worst, will have an impact on post-conflict

reconstruction.<sup>13</sup> Not only the economy but also societal bonds and human security will have to be reconstructed throughout the Ukrainian territory. The armed forces have been strained, despite their strenuous resistance. After more than a year of war, concerns over a severe mental health crisis among soldiers and civilians arise.<sup>14</sup> These are all elements that must be taken into account when thinking about any possible scenarios for a post-war Ukraine.

## Post-conflict human security

Human security is one of the leading approaches in post-conflict operations. The concept adopts a population-centric vision, conceiving security as the protection of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and fulfilment. Bringing this perspective to the Ukrainian case is vital, especially because the first days of the war were characterised by what Carl von Clausewitz would have called *levée en masse*.<sup>15</sup> Several commentators called for "guerrilla insurgency",<sup>16</sup> which

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Ukraine: Civilian Casualty Update 10 January 2023*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/104592>. For an update see: OHCHR, *Ukraine: Civilian Casualty Update 15 May 2023*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/node/105546>.

<sup>11</sup> Steven Feldstein and Brian (Chun Hey) Kot, "Two Deeply Troubling Trends from Ukraine's Year of War", in *Carnegie Commentaries*, 22 February 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/89086>.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Operational Data Portal: *Ukraine Refugees Situation*, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

<sup>13</sup> Hill Kulu et al., "The War and the Future of Ukraine's Population", in *MigrantLife Working Papers*, No. 9 (13 March 2022), [https://risweb.st-andrews.ac.uk/portal/en/researchoutput/the-war-and-the-future-of-ukraines-population\(a720e197-a7fb-4e9a-880f-d52366d53f8b\).html](https://risweb.st-andrews.ac.uk/portal/en/researchoutput/the-war-and-the-future-of-ukraines-population(a720e197-a7fb-4e9a-880f-d52366d53f8b).html).

<sup>14</sup> David Gormezano, "Ukraine Faces a Mental Health Crisis among Soldiers and Civilians Alike", in *France 24*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230223-ukraine-faces-a-mental-health-crisis-among-soldiers-and-civilians-alike>.

<sup>15</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Ware, Wordsworth, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Losh, "The Kharkiv Resistance Has Already Begun", in *Foreign Policy*, 24 February 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/24/russia-ukraine-war-resistance-kharkiv>.

might not be the most accurate term to grasp what was going on, but catches its most important element: non-regular fighters using any available means to defend their hometowns from the Russian invasion, being *de iure* equated with the regular armed forces and thus entitled to the same guarantees as combatants. Over time, they merged into organised resistance movements and voluntary corps, as well as into the Ukrainian armed forces, as President Zelensky imposed the martial law and the general mobilisation. Post-conflict considerations arise from this proliferation of non-state armed groups, whose loyalty might change during the development of the conflict and which will be an actor once the war ends. As a consequence, at the end of the conflict, a substantial effort to demobilise, disarm and reintegrate them in civil society will be needed.

The EU is not new to this kind of activities, especially in its Common Security and Defence Policy missions, as Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes have been part of the EU's supporting efforts in countries like the Central African Republic, Colombia and the Philippines.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, since January 2019, the project "Reintegration Support for Veterans of the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine and Their Families" was launched by the EU in Eastern Ukraine together with the International Organization for

<sup>17</sup> European Commission, *Questions and Answers: A New EU Policy in Support of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration of Former Combatants*, 21 December 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_21\\_6923](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_6923).

Migration.<sup>18</sup> The project includes social cohesion activities, provision of qualified psychological assistance, as well as career development and self-employment support. Veterans have been offered to attend vocational courses, re-qualification or advanced training, or received funding for business development.<sup>19</sup> Building on this experience, the EU could play a decisive role in planning a DDR process in the current scenario as well, possibly raising this issue as soon as possible.

The great availability of weapons on the ground also highlights the need for a SALW control process, as highlighted by Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs.<sup>20</sup> In December 2022, Nakamitsu warned about the risk of diversion and spillover in the Russia-Ukraine war. It is not necessary to look too far for examples: The Small Arms Survey highlighted that the 2014 conflict in Ukraine led to widespread proliferation of small arms, light weapons and ammunition.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> IOM Ukraine, *EU and IOM Support Veterans Reintegration in Ukraine*, 10 July 2019, <https://ukraine.iom.int/node/112446>.

<sup>19</sup> IOM, *EU, IOM Support Veterans' Reintegration in Ukraine*, 12 July 2019, <https://www.iom.int/node/100732>.

<sup>20</sup> UN, *Effective Arms-Control Measures Needed to Block Diversion of Ukraine Weapons*, Senior United Nations Disarmament Official Tells Security Council (SC/15136), 9 December 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15136.doc.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Small Arms Survey, "Footnotes: Takeaways from Previous Small Arms Survey Research on Ukraine", in *Small Arms Survey Blog*, 31 March 2022, <https://smallarmssurvey.medium.com/footnotes-takeaways-from-previous-small-arms-survey-research-on-ukraine-adff89b864d5>.

This suggests the need for deeper and more accurate analysis that could inform the international community's role in supporting the post-conflict recovery in Ukraine, in particular promoting expert research, surveys and conferences on how to plan and prepare for a future DDR program, together with the national counterparts. Failing to take into account the needs of veterans and the risk of an uncontrolled proliferation of weapons in Ukraine would lead to a prolonged state of violence and social distress that would only add to what will, in all likelihood, be an already complex scenario of post-war recovery.

### *Analyse, learn and act*

All post-conflict scenarios present huge challenges, but, in Ukraine's case, some factors are favourable: the governmental institutions are still in place and, with the assistance of the international community, especially the EU, they will continue to deliver basic services to the civilian population, trying to minimise the immediate consequences of the conflict, while implementing long-term projects to restore Ukrainian people's livelihood and well-being. True, the traditional "stabilisation and reconstruction" approach was developed to address state fragility and instability, but it could also be used in a preventive way to avoid that instability dynamics prevail in a conflict-ridden scenario.

This is the right time to plan for the future, to analyse the situation and identify the right indicators for a correct monitoring of the reconstruction efforts. It is time to look at past

experiences and learn the lessons, from the Balkans and Afghanistan above all. Whatever the war will bring to Ukraine, this is the only way to avoid the emergence of another unstable state and unequal society.

3 July 2023

## Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Global Politics and Security* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Editor: Leo Goretti ([l.goretti@iai.it](mailto:l.goretti@iai.it))

- 23 | 32 Silvia Samorè, *Post-conflict Reconstruction in Ukraine: Challenges and Opportunities*
- 23 | 31 Manuel Herrera, *The G7 and the Nuclear Non-proliferation Regime: Between Idealism and Pragmatism*
- 23 | 30 Irene Paviotti and Daniele Fattibene, *A Development Agenda for the 2024 Italian G7 Presidency*
- 23 | 29 Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, *Silvio Berlusconi: A Controversial Protagonist of Italian Politics*
- 23 | 28 Nicola Bilotta, *Breaking the Mold? The Quest for Currency Diversification in a Multipolar World*
- 23 | 27 Stephen R. Grand, *The Revolutionary Kids Are Alright: Egypt Ten Years after the Coup*
- 23 | 26 Nona Mikhelidze, *Unpacking the Vatican's Diplomatic Failure in Reaching a Ceasefire in the Russia-Ukraine War*
- 23 | 25 Anna Cervi, *The Aftermath of the Earthquake in Syria: An Opportunity for Peace?*
- 23 | 24 Nicola Casarini, *Italy's Pivot to the Indo-Pacific – Towards a Value-driven Foreign Policy?*
- 23 | 23 Alessia Chiriatti, *Turkey's Watershed Elections: A Matter of Leadership*