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## INFORMAL WAR-TIME INSTITUTIONS IN SCOPE OF KHARKIV REGION

The paper is devoted to the consideration of informal institutions in the Kharkiv region during a full-scale invasion, which are capable of determining not only the local political process and the characteristics of civil society, but also the course of military operations in the frontline region, as well as the trajectory of the longer process of democratization of Ukraine. In the study, institutions will be defined not so much as organizations, but as practices established in time and space that are decisive within the selected territory and society, whether or not organizationally fixed. In particular, both corruption and local public leadership traditional for pre-war Ukraine are considered, as well as informal institutions of martial law, such as local military leadership, informal practices of the mobilization process, the formation of the volunteer movement, including its military cluster. Informal institutions are studied as social practices stable in time and space, which have both a negative and a positive impact on the course of military operations in the Kharkiv region. Corruption is viewed in a broad sense not only as the appropriation of financial resources, but also as an informal, non-legal method of distributing and redistributing various goods and resources. The mobilization process is examined through the prism of social behavior, which includes human rights violations and backlash in the form of attacks or evadanship. An important obstacle to confronting the northern aggressor neighbor is the informal lines of division between the military and civilian sectors. The article also examines the phenomenon and organized forms of volunteering, both civilian and military, which is an important link in uniting the civilian and military population in the Kharkiv region, maintaining the front line in the region and providing primary assistance to temporarily displaced persons from the combat zone. Of particular importance in the context of the chosen topic is the aspect of borderline identity, which is both heterogeneous and changeable, contains elements of the local and European, the past and the present.

**Keywords:** *informal institutions, democracy, corruption, chiefdom, martial law, local military leadership, volunteerism, military vs. civilians, mobilization, identity.*

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The paper comes from the post-structuralist idea that the state of emergency is declared for the time of war thus for an indefinite term and it (state of exception (Agamben, 2005)) sometimes contradicts democracy because it replaces human rights with the executive power.

Still such measures are often needed to defend the state integrity and national interests.

Indeed, the state of emergency and especially martial law opens the way for manual governing and therefore prepares the ground for the rise of the informal institutions. From one perspective, informal institutions provide fast decision-making, using informal resources and using more powers than formal institutions allow to achieve a proper result. From the other perspective, they tend to be accompanied with corruption scandals, informal, hidden from the

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civil society power and resources redistribution and chiefdom trends.

Therefore the Ukrainian case of informal institutions during the full-scale Russian invasion should be researched, especially in regional perspective with the special attention to the frontline zones, such as the Kharkiv region. Both typical and non-typical war-time institutions are picked regarding their influence on the local war process.

### **Corruption**

Corruption is one of the most common Ukrainian informal institutions through all its history originating from the traditional economy of gift and its scope can be considered to be the main problem in the democracy consolidation process. Neither the European integration process, nor the full-scale invasion haven't coped with its decline, thus showing its traditionalism and rootedness into Ukrainian political and everyday culture. The common forms of corruption such as financial and humanitarian aid appropriation or informal redistribution by public officials are causing lack of confidence in the Ukrainian government from the partner states providing this aid and the demands for a transparent way of its use. Still some forms of corruption were crucially important at the beginning of the full-scale invasion. The first months of the full-scale invasion the informal ammunition redistribution was used to help the frontline units to stop the aggressor and to secure the battle line. As units were receiving weapons and ammunition often without proper documentation, by their commanders' oral or informally written demands only, it's extremely difficult to evaluate the «fairness» of such a redistribution, still this informal practice allowed to save the precious time and refill the frontline gaps much more faster than the legal procedure could allow.

Still the traditional corruption practices such as illicit enrichment using the war is definitely harmful both for the internal processes such as government legitimation by both military and civilians and for the international reliability of Ukraine in the eyes of current and potential partner states. Viktor Pavlushchyk, head of the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP), even called this side of corruption the second war that Ukraine fights ('Ukraine is fighting two wars' 2024)

However, the fight against corruption in the Kharkiv region is provided mostly by civil initiatives and the civil organization "Kharkiv Anticorruption Center" can be considered to be the most influential one that works on a

permanent basis starting from 2015 (Kharkiv Anticorruption Center). During the war time their investigations mostly concern the reconstruction costs and the local budget money laundering in Kharkiv in the Kharkiv region.

### **Informal Practices of the Mobilization Process**

The mobilization process and in particular the mechanisms of mobilizing people, bringing them to the territorial recruitment centers was discussed in Ukraine from 2014, but the discussion became much more intensified starting from 2022 regarding the growing necessity in filling the gaps in the military, especially within infantry and assault brigades. The main question is whether we can neglect human rights, forcing male citizens of the mobilization age to serve, thus lowering the level of liberalism and democracy in order to secure the frontline and not letting the enemy gain more Ukrainian territory. The majority of the passionate population joined the military in 2022 and the only way to restore the military capacity is to conduct compulsory mobilization. Still a big part of civil society, driven by individualism and fear to be killed is struggling against this process, thus deepening the antagonism of national interests vs. civil interests and military vs. civilians, which definitely influences the process of Ukrainian land liberation.

Kharkiv region is considered the mild one regarding the scale of the compulsory mobilization, still the cases of the force excess from the side of servants of the recruitment centers, the traumatization during the mobilization and suicidal behavior up to suicide of the potentially mobilized are often seen in the local news. The stories of local evaders (so called "ukhylyanty") are often shown in a more amazing way with a bit of compassion towards them that makes the recruitment servants who mostly are war veterans feel demonized, neglected, hated in society and sometimes even attacked to death by civilians. Also the mobilization process is accompanied by corruption scandals revealing the long-time existing both national and regional patron-client network.

### **Local Military Leadership**

Local military leadership is often discussed nowadays as potential formation of the post-war feudal structures, supported by new local mini-armies. Therefore, local military leadership provides the arrangement of a more efficient recruiting system along with the traditional mobilization process, applying to the local frontline identity and using the topic of the

«small motherland» defence. Also local military leadership is usually connected to the regional entrepreneurship networks, both legal and illegal ones that allows to fundraise much more efficiently, than using social media only.

It's also important that mostly the leadership units tended to emerge as a unity around the leaders of nationalist civil organizations that allowed to ideologically reproduce the strong internal structure, ideological unity and the principle of both force (racket, assaults) and non-violent (both legal and illegal business) means.

Therefore the most efficient military units that can be researched as strong regional leaderships tending to chiefdoms on perspective are:

1. Special unit of the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine «KRAKEN» (Active Operations Unit KRAKEN) led by the leaders of the National Corps Kharkiv Kostyantyn Nemichev and Danylo Polozhukhno. Emerged from the community of sportsmen and regional football ultras getting known in Kharkiv by stories about street violence this unit nowadays is characterized by the strong structure, loyalty and unity. It became a real phenomenon of the successful transformation of the non-state voluntary formation into the battalions of Territorial Defence Forces and afterwards into the special unit of the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine.

2. «Freikor» unit (Volunteers who defeated the Russian special forces, 2023) was led by Georgiy Tarasenko, who died in March 2022 during the liberation of Mala Rogan and Vilhivka villages. This unit stood up as Kharkiv defenders from the first day of full-scale invasion, thus forming a strong affiliation with Kharkiv inhabitants. None regarding the death of the leader, regarding the relatively long history of the unit, its stable internal structure, unity of strong leaders, the combat experience starting from 2017, this unit shouldn't be underestimated in its potential in fully reuniting again.

3. 429 Separate regiment of unmanned aerial vehicles «Achilles» (429 Separate regiment of unmanned aerial vehicles «Achilles») can be considered one of the leadership units partly connected to the Kharkiv region due to its leader Yurii «Achilles» Fedorenko, who used to be a Kyiv businessman and politician before the full-scale Russian invasion. Having the combat experience from ATO and due to his charisma, manager skills, his network connections within Ukrainian politics and understanding the perspectives of

unmanned aerial systems in the new war format, Fedorenko managed to transform his team from the level of platoon and squadron defending Kyiv region in 2022 into the separate regiment of unmanned aerial vehicles based in Kharkiv region, remaining the main ideological leader of the unit. His marriage to the politician Maria Mezentsseva who represents Kharkiv in the Ukrainian Parliament, as a member of the Servant of the People party along with private reasons can be considered to be the way to become more politically influential, publicly presented and to have more influence on the mobilization process.

### **Military vs. Civilians**

Military and civil sector often oppose to each other, mostly through several key motive lines:

1. Supporting different policy lines, starting from the general views to the views on how the mobilization process should be arranged. Military tend to choose policies favorable towards the order and narrowing democracy if it's needed to defend the national interests. Civilians tend to choose democracy even if it can cause damage to the national interests and the territorial integrity.

2. The political/potentially electoral clash Zelensky vs. Zaluzhny, that demonstrates and deepens the opposition between civil and military trajectories of executive power in Ukraine. This clash can be considered to be dangerous both in the war time and during post-war reconstruction, as it can bring the state to the chaos and usurpation of power. The constant electoral swing within this clash shown by latest sociological researches (Zelensky or Zaluzhny 2025), demonstrates the constantly hesitating public opinion and can open the way towards electoral manipulations and political system destabilization

3. Salary difference. Historically this motive line was to benefit the civilian sector, but the full-scale invasion and rethinking of the military financing brought the opposite disproportion to the table thus provoking jealousy from the civil sector business of the Kharkiv region, suffering from the everyday shelling. However, a lot of military units are using the financial motive to recruit, especially women, as soon as civil business can barely provide the same level of financial supply and social benefits.

### **Volunteer Movement**

Volunteer movement represents the informal institution that tends to sew together military and civil society clusters through cooperation. Nowadays the majority of

volunteer institutions and charity foundations of the Kharkiv region tend to combine work with both military and civilians, and regarding the frontline status of the region the aid is mostly addressed to the locally quartered military forces and temporarily displaced people from the war zone. The most influential regional volunteer and charity organizations are (List of volunteer organizations in the Kharkiv region, 2022): Charitable Organization «Unbreakable Kharkiv Charitable Foundation», Volunteer Organization D20, Kharkiv Help (Netherland foundation Zeilen van Vrijheid representatives), Shields, Culture Shock, Diya Foundation, Charity Foundation «Dopomoga Is Me», CO «Food for Kharkivians», Charity Organization «Station Kharkiv», Charity Foundation «Dar Kharkiv», Volunteer Organization «Hell Kitchen Kharkiv», Puppet Theater Team (HUB L.OB), Serhiy Zhadan Charity Foundation, Charity Foundation «FODY», Charity Foundation «Volonterska», Alcohol Ukulele, Way of Ukraine etc. Along with the organizations trying to combine volunteering for both military and civil sector, animal rescue organizations should be mentioned. UAnimals and Animal Rescue Kharkiv evacuate animals from the war zone in cooperation with local military units.

The recent decision of the Cabinet of Ministers about the creation of air defense groups as part of voluntary formations of territorial communities (How to join the defense of the sky, 2025) is also considered an efficient measure to encourage locals to defend their land without becoming the fully involved part of the military.

### **Borderland Identity**

The Kharkiv regional identity can be considered the extremely heterogeneous one with the trend of Ukrainization and Europeanization, which is influenced by the following factors:

1. Extreme migration processes within the region (Skliar, 2023) due to the constant changes of the frontline since 2022.
2. Migration of the pro-russian inhabitants towards Russia.
3. European and global emigration.
4. Return of the Kharkiv region inhabitants back after deoccupation and relative freezing of the frontline.

Even though the the existence of pro-soviet and pro-russian Kharkiv region demographic cluster has to be taken into consideration while researching the borderline identity, it's also important to understand that the increasing European dimension of identity in the Kharkiv

region is largely influenced by the widespread thought that Ukraine nowadays represents the European frontline, therefore Kharkiv region and Kharkiv as a symbol represents the blade of the frontline that forms the elements of responsibility, fear and pride within the regional identity.

### **Conclusions**

1. Researching informal institutions while defining the outcomes of the russian war against Ukraine is important, especially how the regional ones define the frontline movement. Also the trajectory of the post-war reconstruction will depend on the shape and influence of the informal institutions both on regional and national level.
2. Corruption shows its both sides within the region both as illicit enrichment and informal accelerated military aid redistribution towards the frontline region.
3. Even though the mobilization process in the Kharkiv region is relatively not intensive, it shows its back side of evadership, aggression and human rights violation.
4. Local military leadership is both positively important in securing the frontline and strengthening the regional identity and potentially dangerous in formation of feudal-looking local patron-client structures.
5. There's a significant clash between the military and civil sector that can be fixed by more intensive inclusion of civilians into the protection of the region and volunteering process.
6. The identity based on the mix of regionalism and pride to be the European frontline is a cornerstone of securing the frontline in the Kharkiv region.

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## НЕФОРМАЛЬНІ ІНСТИТУЦІЇ ВОЄННОГО ЧАСУ У МЕЖАХ ХАРКІВСЬКОЇ ОБЛАСТІ

Розглядаються неформальні інституції у Харківській області під час повномасштабного вторгнення, які здатні визначати не тільки місцевий політичний процес та особливості громадянського суспільства, але й перебіг воєнних дій у прифронтовому регіоні, а також траєкторію подальшого процесу демократизації України. У дослідженні інституції визначаються як усталені у часі та просторі практики, що є визначальними в межах обраної території та суспільства, закріплені чи не закріплені організаційно. Зокрема розглядаються як традиційні для довоєнної України корупція та місцеве громадське лідерство, так і неформальні інституції воєнного стану, такі як місцеве військове лідерство, неформальні практики мобілізаційного процесу, формування волонтерського руху, у тому числі його військового кластеру. Неформальні інституції досліджуються як стійкі у часі та просторі суспільні практики, що мають як негативний вплив на перебіг воєнних дій у Харківській області, так і позитивний. Корупція розглядається у широкому сенсі не тільки як привласнення фінансових коштів, але й як неформальний, невідповідний до норм права спосіб розподілу та перерозподілу різноманітних благ та засобів. Мобілізаційний процес досліджується крізь призму соціальної поведінки, що включає порушення прав людини та зворотні реакції у формі нападів або ухилянтства. Важливою перепорою на шляху протистояння північному сусіду-агресору є неформальні лінії розколу між військовим та цивільним сектором. Також розглядається явище та організовані форми волонтерства, як цивільного, так і військового, що є важливою ланкою об'єднання цивільного та військового населення у Харківській області, утримання лінії фронту в області та первинної допомоги тимчасово переміщеним особам із зони бойових дій. Окреме значення в контексті обраної тематики має аспект порубіжної ідентичності, що містить елементи локального та європейського, минулого та сучасного.

Ключові слова: неформальні інституції, демократія, корупція, вождизм, воєнний стан, місцеве військове лідерство, волонтерство, військові vs. цивільні, мобілізація, ідентичність.

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