

WOTRO / NWO: Security & Rule of Law - Strategic Research Fund: 'Comprehensive Approaches to Human Security in Fragile and Conflict Affected Settings: Transnational Dimensions' (2016-18)

Human Security and Conflict in Ukraine: Local Approaches and Transnational Dimensions

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Summary of the project

Human security is at risk in fragile and conflict-affected Ukraine where lack of progress breeds frustration. This project brings new insights on the institutional weaknesses, conflict drivers and key actors' incentives that converge to stifle peace-building and reform. It identifies priorities for action to unlock change through the mobilisation of local stakeholders. Research focuses on strengthening state capacity, confidence-building efforts, and post-conflict recovery, at the local and regional levels. The project also addresses the complex connections between distinct domestic and transnational security challenges and local dynamics. It aims to inform an effective approach to trigger reform and tackle spoiler factors. Selected local stakeholders are engaged all along the project to inform findings with their direct experience and take part with other practitioners in 'Change-makers forums' for knowledge sharing and feedback. Knowledge sharing and mentoring activities will contribute to enhance local capacity and international awareness.

Description of the project

a) Background and rationale

Ukraine is a conflict-affected country where many drivers of fragility converge. The on-going armed conflict in the East of Ukraine has deeply affected human security. Tensions in society are at a critical level and have a clear transnational dimension. They touch upon deep issues of (national) identity and allegiance, and are nourished by competing information campaigns across borders. While the situation in Ukraine shares features with conflict in other parts of the world, it is particularly dangerous due to its geopolitical consequences.

The government of Ukraine and its international partners have undertaken diplomatic negotiations to enforce the ceasefire agreements and pave the way to a non-violent settlement. However, a much broader range of factors that compound state fragility and undermine human security needs addressing. Dealing with the consequences of conflict in the impoverished and divided East Ukraine requires effective cooperation between local authorities and communities, national institutions and international partners.

Theories of conflict and change often take either a top-down or a bottom-up perspective. They tend to posit traditional security thinking against human security approaches. We consider this juxtaposition non-productive. Our project takes a more comprehensive approach, integrating different perspectives, but focussing on government strategies employed at the local, regional and

national levels and the role of non-governmental actors. An approach that integrates transnational elements and analysis of actors and factors shaping change within Ukraine helps to provide insights that are relevant to the current state of affairs in the country (and to comparable conflicts elsewhere) and it can contribute to refining existing theories of change.

Specifically, the project focuses on three key areas for peace- and state-building and restoring human security, and their interconnections. These are:

1. Strengthening local state capacity. Public authorities at the national, regional and local level employ different strategies in order to (re-)claim legitimacy and reduce the risk of conflict through local government reform (in light of decentralization policies) and the fight against corruption.
2. Confidence building in conflict-affected areas. This looks at how local and regional institutions and the national government confront the political and social tensions that have been aggravated by the conflict in the East.
3. Post-conflict recovery. Local, regional and national authorities have to deal with the immediate consequences from the conflict in the East, including the return of veterans of the government's 'Anti-Terrorist Operation', the needs of women affected by the conflict and internally displaced persons, and the emergence of new (informal) paramilitary groupings.

The geographic focus of our research includes areas in Ukraine's East controlled by the Ukrainian authorities after temporary separatist control, as well as areas in the country's southern and eastern regions that have been affected by political, social, and ethnic tensions resulting from the conflict in the East (including case studies). For security-related reasons no research is planned in the separatist-held territories, although we consider our activities potentially relevant for these areas too.

b) Objectives

The project aims to generate knowledge on the links between conflict-related threats to human security and structural causes of state fragility in Ukraine, especially at the regional and local level, and encompassing national and transnational factors. It will provide new insights on key drivers of fragility and conflict, and it will especially aim to formulate the priorities for local and international actors to cooperatively and effectively contribute to the strengthening of human security in the targeted regions.

We will engage a broad range of stakeholders in the field to draw from their experience and to make sure that different constituencies – scholars, practitioners and policy-makers – interact and knowledge is shared. By engaging local stakeholders, we also aim to better equip them to become agents of change and reform in Ukraine through confidence- and capacity-building activities. These activities will consist of mentoring young scholars or practitioners on relevant themes and exposing local stakeholders to project findings including best practices from other conflict-affected theatres (see below).

c) Research questions and methods

1. What are the connections between trans-national challenges, local conflict dynamics and domestic drivers of fragility in affected areas of Ukraine?
2. How do authorities from the local to the national level and relevant non-state actors respond to the challenges related to state fragility, especially in light of intra-societal tensions and the conflict in the East?
3. How can theories of change contribute to providing insights into the issue of state fragility and human security in Ukraine?
4. What implications can be drawn from our evidence-based research and the engagement of local stakeholders for theories of change and their application to Ukraine's context?
5. What lessons and best practices can be drawn to inform policy initiatives to improve human security, institutional performance and community resilience?

This project will combine desk research with extensive fieldwork in a representative range of locations in Ukraine's southern and eastern regions, including locations that have seen significant separatist activity. The empirical research will be informed by insights from cutting-edge academic scholarship on conflict, human security and peace-building.

d) Knowledge sharing activities

The project includes a three-pronged approach to knowledge-sharing:

1. Publications reaching a wide network of stakeholders in Ukraine and the international public at large. These will include three policy-oriented briefs on each of the key issues addressed by the project, and three working papers collecting the findings of the project and drawing implications for theories of change (in English and Ukrainian).
2. One kick-off workshop and three 'Change-makers forums' involving local and international stakeholders/practitioners as well as a concluding workshop. Each forum will address one of the key research areas with a view to discuss research findings, collect feedback, share knowledge and raise awareness. Consortium members will invite to each forum one practitioner and one researcher from outside Ukraine with in-depth experience of best practices in addressing related challenges in other conflict theatres.
3. Knowledge-sharing itself will be a key component of capacity-building by exposing local stakeholders to state-of-the-art practices and theories of change and by using research findings to inspire the work of others.

Partners:

Leiden University: International Studies / Relations; Russian and Eurasian Studies

Carnegie Europe (Brussels)

All-Ukrainian Charitable Foundation "Right to Protection" (R2P) (Kyiv)

