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Credibility of international organizations in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (part 2)

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has contributed not only to the accelerated erosion of the international order but also to a decline in trust of international organizations. The limited effectiveness of key inter-state organizations, the controversial activities of some important non-governmental organizations, and Russia's consistent disregard for international law may translate into a further decline in the credibility of international institutions. Ukraine has been skeptical about their effectiveness in maintaining security since 2014, and in a broader perspective, the erosion of these institutions undermines the principles of the entire current architecture of international security.

The pillars of a democratic civil society are non-governmental organizations created 'bottom-up' – also those operating internationally. In the context of Russian aggression, the activity of international non-governmental organizations also sparked a lot of controversy – this applies even to the oldest of them: the International Committee of the Red Cross, which was accused of little involvement in and a misunderstanding of the specificity of this conflict¹.

Development of a civil society in Ukraine. Ukrainian civil society has been developing intensively for years, which usually remains on the margins of analyses of the war. The year 2014 was of particular importance as well as the broad mobilization in the face of Russia's aggression, and the same is true today. However, the non-governmental sector of Ukraine had been developing earlier, for at least two decades, often using their experience and cooperation with Polish organizations (this cooperation was often financed by external entities, e.g., the German Jugendwerk or the Polish-American Freedom Foundation). The foundations of the third sector in Ukraine were created, among other things, by sharing Polish experiences of reforms as well as cooperation of local self-government institutions (e.g. town twinning – this cooperation is currently very intense and extensive). This facilitated the development of the Ukrainian voluntary movement after 2014, which provided direct support for the defense against Russian multidimensional aggression.

This support, spontaneous, bottom-up, bypassing bureaucracy and corruption patterns, has turned out to be so effective that nowadays Ukrainian society trusts social organizations more than the bureaucratic structures of the state (although it should be emphasized that the degree of trust in local and self-government authorities is significant).

A report on a sociological survey conducted by the "Democratic Initiative" Foundation together with the Razumkov Center in August 2022 indicates that voluntary organizations enjoy 85% support, thus are ahead of the president and all state bodies in the rankings, and second only to the armed forces, The National Guard, and the State Emergency Service of Ukraine.

It should be emphasized that the Ukrainian third sector has developed thanks to international cooperation and that is why the issue of trust in international non-governmental organizations is so important here.

Amnesty International report and its consequences. The report of Amnesty International (AI), one of the largest (around 7 million members and donors around the world) and most influential international human rights NGOs, published on August 4, 2022, was received with even greater disappointment in Ukraine. This document, which caused great controversy not only in Ukraine, is difficult to describe as a report – it is not known what

¹ A separate problem, also noticed in Ukraine, is the attitude of many foreign journalists who treat the war only as a source of "sellable" sensation and the macabre, and a springboard for their own careers.

methodology was used, whose testimonies were considered, and why the Ukrainian branch of AI was not allowed to work on the report's creation.

This study contains a number of generalizations, de facto discrediting its conclusions, according to which the Ukrainian armed forces violate the international law of armed conflicts, putting the civilian population at risk: 19 cases were cited – at the front line exceeding 1,000 km (at the same time, e.g., WHO reported that Russia has already carried out over 430 attacks on Ukrainian health care facilities). In fact, this document serves the interests of Russia, legitimizing its narrative, according to which the presence of Ukrainian troops in civilian facilities is the reason for attacks against them. Russian propaganda used the AI report to strengthen this narrative and thus justify attacks on Ukraine's civil infrastructure – it was also quickly picked up outside Russia by the pro-Russian media and circles. Significantly, the report (its fragments favorable to Russia) was widely publicized in Russia – while the Russians do not have access to other AI materials: the organization's Moscow office was closed by the Russian authorities in April this year, and the website was blocked.

The Ukrainian authorities were not allowed to comment on the report. As a result, on August 5, Oksana Pokalchuk, who had been in charge of the Ukrainian AI branch since 2016, which in practice ceased to exist, resigned. She noted that the report undermined 30 years of human rights protection efforts in Ukraine. The organization's image losses are so great that it is difficult to predict that its Ukrainian branch will be reactivated. The authors of the report showed incompetence, ignorance of humanitarian law, and a lack of understanding of the specifics of the conflict (for example, they suggested that Ukrainians should defend themselves in "dense forests", not in towns, without taking into account what the Russians were doing in the occupied towns). At the same time, allegations reappeared against AI that in 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, it had duplicated the Russian version of events.

The organization did not admit to being wrong. This may indicate that despite many achievements and merits in the field of human rights protection (AI received, among others, the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977 for its activities in this field), the organization is struggling with ailments characteristic of many large INGO's today: excessive centralization, ignorance of the realities, domination of ideology over substantive competences, corporate model of organizational culture (a few years ago in AI there was a mobbing scandal, which resulted in even suicides of the organization's employees), as well as the increasingly dubious impartiality – which by definition should characterize this type of institution.

Conclusions. The erosion of the international order also clearly affects institutions – it is not only a matter of ongoing open aggression, striving to revise borders by force, war crimes, and thus open violations of international law and custom, including the United Nations Charter, a kind of "constitution of the international community" and the statutory document of the United Nations. It also means a violation of the principles on which the functioning of the international order after World War II was based, which was pointed out by, inter alia, President Joe Biden at a session of the UN General Assembly. It is important in this context that excluding any states from the organization is not an option, as it is counterproductive and can only lead to an escalation of aggression – which has become the experience of the League of Nations.

The consequence of the war may not only deepen the crisis of the authority of international organizations, both interstate and non-governmental, and international law, but also other institutions, which can already be observed by the example of the Holy See (being the subject of international relations and international law), whose reputation and position suffered significantly after a series of unfortunate statements by Pope Francis, which testified to a misunderstanding of the origins and specificity of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Moreover, the weakening of international institutions also means an increased probability that regional conflicts will arise or revive. Such a situation took place after the end of the Cold War, the logic of which guaranteed considerable stability of the international order. At that time, many local conflicts (territorial, ethnic, religious, etc.) were "defrosted" – the current international order collapsed. At present, in the territory of the former USSR, a gradual process of diminishing Russian influence and growing conflicts are already visible.

From Ukraine's point of view, international institutions (the exceptions are still NATO and the EU) are unable to make a significant contribution to stopping Russian aggression. This is evidenced by, e.g., President Volodymyr

Zelensky's repeated, demonstrative, and ineffective appeals to the United Nations, calling for the creation of an international tribunal to judge Russian crimes, removing Russia's veto right, imposing a limit on Russian oil prices or reforming the Security Council. Ukrainians have also largely lost their trust in international civil society and are focusing on using their own social and human capital.

The case of AI has also enlivened the discussion on the extent and scope of Russian influence in the West, which has been built and reinforced over the years. In this context, it should be noted that one of the co-authors of the AI report, Donatella Rovera, had already become famous for a public claim, formulated in a documentary, that 70% of weapons supplied to Ukraine are not sent to the front but to the black market – for which there is no evidence. Nevertheless, it is a theory intensely promoted by the Russian propaganda narrative.