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Exposure to Violence and Prosocial Attitudes

This policy brief examines the academic literature on the impact of conflict exposure on pro-social behavior, a crucial component of resilience and societal cohesion. It also explores potential implications for public opinion, particularly in relation to Ukraine's prospective EU accession and foreign relations.



Introduction

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, Russian forces have launched daily attacks with varying intensity. Living in a conflict zone profoundly affects individuals in multiple dimensions, including physical and mental health, as well as economic and social conditions. While reports often focus on the destruction of physical and human capital, social capital is equally affected by violence, influencing community resilience, cohesion, and cooperation. In conflict settings, identity can become more pronounced, particularly in distinguishing allies from adversaries.

This policy brief overviews the academic literature on this topic; the impact of conflict exposure on pro-social behavior broadly defined. This literature primarily examines post-conflict settings within the broader discourse on sustaining peace. It focuses on individuals directly engaged in combat or civilians directly affected by violence, particularly regarding the reintegration of former combatants and the rehabilitation of affected populations. As discussed below, results vary, depending on indicators used and the specific context. There is more consistent support for an impact on cooperation than on trust for instance. Another key finding in the literature is the differential behavior towards in-group members – those with whom individuals identify – versus out-group members, raising important questions about national identity and attitudes towards foreign allies. Based on this literature, the brief proceeds to discuss potential implications for public attitudes in Ukraine, focusing on Ukraine's prospective EU accession.

Literature Overview

This review focuses on the empirical literature, though the theoretical basis spans psychology and the social sciences. Post-traumatic growth theory posits that adversity can foster positive change, whereas post-traumatic withdrawal theory

suggests that violence exposure leads to distrust and social withdrawal. Economic arguments emphasize the need for rebuilding, enhanced safety concerns, or reduced time constraints for civic participation due to economic disruptions. Other perspectives highlight the detrimental effects of fragmented communities, given that trust and cooperation take time to develop, or suggest that individuals directly involved in violence may face social ostracization (see Fiedler 2023 for a detailed discussion).

Empirical studies on pro-social behavior employ diverse methodologies and data, including survey responses, indicators of political engagement, and controlled experiments measuring cooperation and trust. Methodology and research design vary, but most studies compare those with direct exposure to violence (treatment group) to those indirectly exposed (control group) within a post-conflict context. It is thus important to note that even the control group experiences some degree of conflict-related impact, meaning that studies specifically capture the effects of direct exposure.

Fiedler (2023), in a recent overview, categorizes the impact of violence into three main domains: personalized and political trust, cooperation, and political engagement. Most studies suggest a negative effect on trust, as seen in Kosovo (Kijewski & Freitag, 2018) and across Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia post-World War II (Grosjean, 2014). Bauer et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of 16 early studies measuring the effects of war violence on social participation, cooperation, and trust. When it came to trust, no significant impact of exposure to violence was found. Cassar et al. (2013) found that Tajik civil war survivors exhibited lower trust in close neighbors but not distant villagers, suggesting that intra-community political divisions played a role. However, a small number of studies report positive effects, such as Hall & Werner (2022), who found that victimized Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Turkey exhibited higher generalized trust.



In terms of cooperation, early studies overwhelmingly support a positive effect, including the meta-analysis of Bauer et al. (2016). For example, Bauer et al. (2014) held experimental games in Sierra Leone and Georgia, demonstrating that those directly exposed to violence exhibited greater altruism and inequality aversion. More recent work has come to different conclusions, however. Hager et al. (2019) found that Uzbek victims of violence in Kyrgyzstan were less cooperative in experimental games with both in-group and out-group members. Similarly, Cecchi & Duchoslav (2018) found that violence-exposed caregivers in Uganda contributed less in public goods games.

When it comes to political engagement, most studies find a positive effect, including the meta-analysis by Bauer et al. (2016) looking at participation in social groups and political engagement. Early and influential studies by Bellows & Miguel (2006, 2009), found that individuals in Sierra Leone with direct war exposure were more likely to participate in community meetings, elections, and social or political groups. Interestingly, while Kijewski & Freitag (2018) found that violence reduced trust in Kosovo, Freitag et al. (2019) found increased political participation in the same setting. Grosjean (2014) also reported a negative effect on trust but found that conflict victims were more likely to engage in civic organizations and collective action. These findings suggest that broad measures of prosocial behavior may be overly simplistic.

A common, and important, finding in much of the literature is with regards to differential behavior towards in-groups and out-groups. Bauer et al. (2014) found that exposure to violence increased altruism and inequality aversion only when interactions occurred within the in-group. Similar findings emerge in studies on soccer players in Sierra Leone (Cecchi et al., 2016) and trust experiments in Colombia (Francesco et al., 2023). Calvo et al. (2019) found that in conflict-affected areas of Mali, participation increased in kinship-

based groups while it decreased in more inclusive organizations. Similarly, Mironova & Whitt (2016) found that Kosovars exhibited greater altruism and cooperation when interacting with in-group members. These findings align with research on parochial altruism in general, where cooperation and altruistic behavior are evolutionarily linked to in-group solidarity in response to external threats (e.g. Bernhard et al., 2006, Tajfel et al., 1979). There is thus a risk that social identity becomes more based on a narrow in-group (defined by ethnicity, religion, or language) potentially exacerbating societal divisions.

Implications for Ukraine

What do these insights imply for Ukraine? Given the context-dependent nature of the literature, definitive conclusions are challenging. Two studies on conflict exposure in eastern Ukraine offer preliminary insights. Mironova & Whitt (2021) examined fairness preferences among young Ukrainian men in Donbas, finding that, while no bias against ethnic Russians existed at the onset of violence in 2014, such bias increased after a year of conflict – particularly among non-combatants, contradicting typical patterns in the literature. Coupe & Obrizan (2016) used survey data from November 2014, showing that direct exposure to violence affected political behavior: physical damage reduced voter turnout, while property damage increased support for Western-leaning parties and stronger opposition to Russian aggression.

The strong effect on non-combatants in Mironova & Whitt (2021) highlights a key limitation in the literature – findings on direct exposure may not generalize to entire populations under invasion. Comparing directly and indirectly exposed individuals does not capture the broader societal impact, potentially leading to an overly optimistic view of conflict-induced prosocial behavior. If everyone is negatively affected, those with direct exposure to violence may simply be impacted a little less.



Of particular interest is how the war shapes national identity, in-group perceptions, and political preferences. These dynamics matter for domestic cohesion, interethnic relations, and Ukraine's foreign policy trajectory. Focusing on the latter, the EU and the U.S. have provided substantial support during the full-scale invasion but delays and insufficiencies in aid may influence perceptions of these allies. EU accession presents economic benefits but entails lengthy and costly reforms with uncertain outcomes. Additionally, shifting U.S. policies and emerging geopolitical alignments may alter Ukrainian attitudes toward Western institutions.

Terror management theory (Landau et al., 2004) suggests that fear strengthens support for charismatic leadership, which, in fragile democratic settings, may favor more authoritarian tendencies. If Western democratic institutions lose appeal, this could negatively impact Ukraine's political engagement, trust in allies, and willingness to align with European values, which are crucial for successful EU integration.

Conclusions

This review examined the literature on exposure to violence and prosocial behavior, discussing implications for Ukraine's societal resilience and international alignment. The findings suggest no universal relationship between conflict exposure and prosociality; instead, effects vary depending on the recipient of trust, cooperation, and engagement. Generally, prosocial behavior increases within in-groups, while attitudes toward out-groups may remain unchanged or worsen. In the Ukrainian context, this has ramifications for internal cohesion and external diplomatic relations, particularly regarding the country's path toward EU membership.

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