

UKRAINIAN PHRONESIS: BOTTOM-UP RESISTANCE AND THE BANALITY OF GOODNESS

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Abstract. The article opens with the author's personal account of living through the very first days of the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine, with the turning point being the proliferation of cases of grassroots resistance intertwined with mockery and humour. Laughter became a medicine against the war traumas and paralysing fears; it also signalled the moral bankruptcy of the aggressor and the existential choice of the Ukrainian polity to defend itself. The author provides a conceptual alternative to disseminated claims of the allegedly outdated heroic ethos in present-day Ukraine (Habermas 2022), by framing grassroots resistance of Ukrainian citizens – in a paraphrase of Hannah Arendt – as 'the banality of goodness': when essentially courageous deeds are done and justified in a routine, matter-of-fact way. This mode of action, driven by the intrinsic understanding of the 'right' moral choices aligned with the values and beliefs of someone, is captured by the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* as exercising values in daily life. The author argues that multiple – and mutual – misreadings between Russia, Ukraine, and the collective West (however heterogeneous and vague the latter entity is) were defined by their divergent modes of rationality, where phronetic rationality manifested in Ukraine became opposed to different modes of instrumental rationality elsewhere. The article concludes with the suggestion that phronetic practices as *ad hoc* solutions to unprecedented challenges will be increasingly demanded in today's turbulent world, and the Ukrainian case might provide useful templates for future phronetic praxis.



Keywords: Ukrainian resistance, grassroots practices, humanity, banality of goodness, instrumental rationality, phronetic action.

Intro: Laughter as a medicine

There are well-known somatic symptoms of psychic trauma: numbness, dissociation from the body, limited responsiveness to external triggers, tunnel vision, slowing down or a frozen state of the psyche. There are also oft-discussed reactions to danger: fight-flight-freeze-fawn. Collective traumas enact different mechanisms on the macro level, yet they tend to infuse similar reactions in discrete individuals. I have vague memories of the first days after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion: mind you, it caught me in Prague, in an objectively safe environment. Despite that fact, all the signs of the first sentence were there: when I was arguing that Lenin did not create Ukraine – live on CNN Prima, on early Saturday morning – it was as if I was observing my body from the outside, while my ears felt like they were being filled with water. I could not stop watching frightening scenes on the screen while hearing live sounds of shelling when talking on the phone to my parents in Kharkiv. The next day, on February 27th, I headed to what turned to be a huge rally on the central square in Prague: in fight mode, fearful yet determined, equipped with anger, awe, and a hand-made banner. After the rally, I had an expected rant with my Ukrainian colleagues about recent news and prognoses, and updates from our families back in Ukraine. And then suddenly something shifted. We started recalling the anecdotes that filled social media shortly after the invasion (e.g. Pekar 2022): about a bold lady giving sunflower seeds to a Russian soldier so that when he is buried, something good grows out of him; about a clever farmer pulling an abandoned Russian tank with his tractor; about a sassy woman from Konotop (many stories were about women, indeed!) warning occupants that they would get erectile dysfunction, as local women were all witches; and so on. We could not stop laughing, and that laughter not only released frozen fear and pain from our bodies but also, most importantly, gave us hope.

Every fight has a strong moral component. Hannah Arendt aptly remarked that force and power are opposite to each other: when brutal force is imposed, its originator exposes his symbolic bankruptcy, his inability to achieve his objectives in other ways (Arendt 1970: 56). In the current case, also laughter opposed fear: when the aggressor is not feared but laughed at, it signifies his symbolic loss, too. The fear has been natural; it would have been absurd not to be scared in the face of unimaginable atrocities. But it was mockery and laughter that supported the Ukrainian agency, the conscious choice to resist what was widely advertised as impossible to resist. The iconic phrase addressing

the Russian warship epitomised this resilience. I remember the huge wave of popular jokes during the Maidan movement and plentiful Internet memes (like ‘Yarosh’s business card’) in the early days of the Russian invasion in 2014. Times and again, Ukrainians overcame their fear in the face of a strong enemy, thus proving that both justice and moral righteousness were on their side. Helmuth Plessner (2020) argues that crying and laughter are two basic modes of human experience in the world. Both of those helped me and my colleagues on that cold February day reconnect with our bodies and keep moving.

Sticking to the human *per se* became the flagship of Ukrainian resistance throughout this macabre war. The daily actions of Ukrainians disregarded geopolitical calculations and rational prognoses, but they also demonstrated the capacity of humanity to prevail over ideological superstructures. Grieving and hoping, inspired and at times desperate, ordinary citizens help each other and defend what is dear to their hearts. They rescue animals and carry their pets wherever they are forced to go, thereby demonstrating that any life is precious. They plant flowers and repair destroyed buildings, which shows their hopes for the future. They routinely donate to the Ukrainian armed forces and carry disassembled weaponry in their luggage. And most of those things are done without heroic ethos or pathos. We heard about the banality of evil during World War II (Arendt 2006). Michael Billig (1995) illuminated for us the banality of nationalism in the post-national era. The unfolding Ukrainian story is for me about *the banality of goodness*: when essentially courageous, if not outright heroic, deeds are conducted in a matter-of-fact way. This story dates back to at least the days of Maidan, and it is properly shown in the Sergei Loznitsa *Maidan* documentary (2014): where many scenes show people routinely making sandwiches, building barricades, finding and delivering required medicine, etc. Without knowing the background and context of the struggle, one would not guess that these mundane activities entailed danger and tough moral choices.

Truth be told, the Ukrainian resistance in 2022 was framed domestically and in the West heroically, indeed, like in the state-launched marketing campaign ‘Be brave like Ukraine’, but actions on the ground have largely defied such labelling. I suggest that they could be best captured by the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, the notion of practices aligned with values, originating from the intuitive sense of what feels right at any given moment, without any fixation on the outcome or any prescribed scenario (cf. Aristotle 2006; Flyvbjerg 2001). To be clear, post-factum mythologization along the heroic lines is present on various levels, but the practices themselves emerge from an inner calling to do the right thing. The unfolding tragedy ignited *phronetic* actions also outside Ukraine. When Polish citizens rushed to the Ukrainian border with their cars to pick up refugees, and Czechs, Italians, and other Europeans came to refugee centres with food, toys,

and diapers without any order, coordination, or ready-made scripts, it was the same drive to do something aligned with one's values and beliefs, simply because abstaining felt like a wrong moral choice.

Enacting values: Ukrainian phronesis against instrumental rationality

It became commonplace that Western expectations proved spectacularly wrong in the estimates of both Russian military power and the capacity and ferocity of Ukrainian resistance. Kyiv was expected to fall within three days, and many lauded Western experts designed that armed resistance would be futile due to the drastic asymmetry of the military might of the two sides. The Ukrainians decided otherwise, both the officials and the citizenry, with arguably the former mirroring the latter. The Ukrainian border guards refused to surrender to the Russian warship. Ukrainian citizens were trying to stop armoured vehicles bare-armed. President Zelensky responded accordingly. His famous statement 'I need an ammo, not a ride' sealed the deal between the authorities and the citizens that the nation would resist and fight the invasion. Western experts extolled that heroism while also thinking it was futile, and Kremlin mouthpieces engaged in conspiracy theories. Multiple – and mutual – misreadings between Russia, Ukraine, and the collective West (however heterogeneous and vague this entity is) were defined by their divergent modes of rationality. Every side was extrapolating its worldview as a universal, or default, model for framing the situation.

The main epistemological fallacy of the 'West' is its hegemonic instrumental rationality: whatever is not 'pragmatic', i.e. does not guarantee a desired outcome, according to expert expectations and theoretical extrapolations, is proclaimed absurd and irrational. A telling example of the Western misreading could be Jurgen Habermas's op-ed (2022) where he presents the strategies of the Ukrainian population as a stance of outdated nationally-engaged heroic ethos, misplaced in contemporary Europe: 'the more national and more post-national mentalities of populations provide the background for different attitudes toward war in general. This difference becomes clear when one contrasts the widely admired, heroic resistance and self-evident willingness to sacrifice displayed by the Ukrainian population with what might be expected of "our", generally speaking, Western European populations in a similar situation' (Habermas 2022). There are a number of unquestioned assumptions in this reasoning, the crucial one being that Russia cannot lose, thus the only choice at hand is between 'a defeat of Ukraine or the escalation of a limited conflict into a third world war' (Habermas 2022), thus the realistic attitude should follow the well-known and well-tried (or, better, well-failed) strategy of appeasement of the aggressor.

The main epistemological fallacy of the Kremlin is the denial of agency to minor actors beyond top officials and great powers: Russian narratives exclusively focus on control centres, be that on Bankova street in Kyiv or ‘the Washington obkom (Party committee)’. As the well-known Ukrainian journalist Nataliya Gumenyuk shows in her report on the ground: ‘Russian occupiers in Ukraine do not understand that local authorities here do not follow orders from the president or security service, but represent communities or their own opinions. Unable to comprehend this freedom of thought, they torture officials and activists, demanding to know who is orchestrating protests in Russian-controlled areas’ (Gumenyuk 2022). The West and the Kremlin seem to converge in their instrumental rendering of rationality, where all actions must be carried out towards some goal, albeit with drastically different agendas: the continuation of ‘business as usual’ vs. the ultimate disruption that instantiates a new world order with a new hierarchy of great powers.

Ukrainians intuitively sensed that both models were disadvantageous to them: being marginalised as a neglected periphery, at best exploited by the hegemonic global capital, or even worse – being sacrificed as a disposable resource to rebuild the grandeur of the resentful empire. So, they started acting to open up an alternative future where values could be exercised, not just declared. Importantly, this did not lead to alternative intellectual constructions but rather to practices centred around values, where freedom of choice seems to be a necessary prerequisite for future values to get traction. In the same report by Gumenyuk, she remarks: ‘My circle of friends and I discuss democracy, accountability, and the rule of law, but we long believed that we were a minority in Ukraine, that the majority of our compatriots did not care about these abstract terms. Yet in reporting on Putin’s invasion, travelling through my country, I have heard fellow Ukrainians, without any encouragement, explain these enormous concepts better than many academics. I listened as those frontline fighters spoke of the freedom to choose who governed them and change course if need be, and the freedom to chart one’s path in life. I heard a mayor say that his town near the Russian border was defending civilization and fighting on behalf of a world where laws mattered. A window installer in Odessa, on the Black Sea coast, told me he had learned to fire a gun to ensure that he did not have to “live in a country where Moscow tells me who to elect”’ (Gumenyuk 2022).

The story of an ordinary guy, posted in the Semantic Corpus project, has a telling title: ‘Not everyone is a hero, but everybody is human’ (2022). Despite the arch framing of the project, which is heroic indeed, this one tells an all-too-ordinary story of a guy who shied away from going to the frontline and who failed to rescue his mother from Mariupol but ‘just’ launched a successful volunteer initiative and ‘just’ went to the occupied territory where he got detained and escaped.

This narrative contains several important points. First, it is a typical story of a volunteer initiative, when a post on a social network fulfilled the goal of collecting UAH 60,000 in just one day. It rhymes with the personal story posted in this issue (Yurchuk 2022: 43). But the most important point is the following one, contained in the story's conclusion: 'Some can say our hero did wrong, that he had to do nothing, that he put himself in danger in vain. However, Eugene did as his heart told him, despite criticism' (Kostyk 2022). Such 'following the heart' is a description of a phronetic action. As Duvenage reminds us, summarizing Aristotle's writings and their further interpretations by Gadamer, Arendt and other scholars: 'phronesis is not acquired prescriptively like the technical skills or the blueprint of the craftsman. It is here not about a means-end relationship: Phronesis has no fixed goal or knowledge acquired in advance. It is rather about ethical knowledge (arete) that is formed through our daily exercise of the virtues on the way to the good life' (Duvenage 2015: 80). And once we acknowledge that our life worlds are heavily impacted by politics, and that refraining from the corrupt playground of crooks that is politics is not an option, something new emerges: public politics as *res publica*, concerted actions oriented towards the common good.

One might ask any Ukrainian today about their recent experiences, and they would normally give you a handful of amazing stories from their close milieu while taking them as 'normal' behaviour. My best friend, a senior executive in a private company in Kyiv, on February 24 was touring the city in her private car, to the accompaniment of sirens, attempting to deliver salaries to her employees. I was begging her to take her children and join me in Prague as soon as possible. She replied: 'Not before I do this. The war has begun – people will need money to save their families. It is my responsibility to provide it to them'. A famous female singer with a glamorous image, after several days of staying in a bomb shelter in Kyiv, went to work as a volunteer in a kitchen, where she peeled potatoes for many weeks in a row – just 'to do something useful' for those who defend us. It ruined her knuckles, but she just shrugs her shoulders, seemingly being at peace with her choices. I am giving these examples of small quotidian deeds, as I believe they complement more heroic ones (e.g. Paplauskajte & Gorčinska 2022), which together generate the reality of the Ukrainian resistance. My parents left Kharkiv after several weeks of painful negotiations. In late August, however, my mom – a professor – took a trip back to pick up her notes. She is not a person of the digital age, so she prepares for her classes using the piles of notes accumulated over decades. Kharkiv is still shelled heavily, and staying safe there is almost like playing Russian roulette (what fresh irony is packed into this expression!). But a new semester was about to begin at the University, so how could she not be best prepared to deliver for her students?

Conclusion:
the fusion of horizons
towards a shared future

This essay does not aim to praise Ukrainians as exceptionally moral people. It rather presents this story of resistance as a telling case that illuminates to us some alternative practices that counter many ills of contemporary society: its selfishness, radical individualism, and greed for profit. Such practices can pop up in various contexts, especially if properly acknowledged when they do. However, phronetic practices tend to appear in settings where the existing institutional setup is weak and dysfunctional: the very absence of ‘technological’, prescripted solutions creates space where people have to ‘fend for themselves’ (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019: 18). True miracles happen, however, when extra-institutional solidarity extends to people outside traditional networks of personal acquaintance. It invokes a civil – as opposite to heroic – ethos. It has happened repeatedly in Ukrainian history as a means of survival when faced with existential danger. In contrast to multiple claims that Ukrainians have intrinsic democratic instincts, I would focus on the fact that true mass resistance has always been ignited by situations of not mere threats to democracy but of existential dangers, when people were assaulted in a cynical way, which put the basic safety of the community at risk (take, for example, the kidnapping and murder of the famous journalist Georgiy Gongadze; the brutal beating of the students’ camp on the Maidan; the military assault of the Russian army). When institutional structures prove unable to find a proper response to an existential challenge, citizens protest and start seeking *ad hoc* solutions: most recently, providing for the army before the state does. Interestingly, these practices got disseminated in the army ranks as well. Foreign observers report in disbelief how various army units contact each other to exchange their trophies, which enables them to quickly find missing parts for broken vehicles and weapons (Dovgopolij 2022).

There is a Ukrainian adage that could be roughly translated as ‘necessity is the mother of invention’, which might explain the origins of such exceptional creativity. However, in the increasingly volatile contemporary world, where the scale of challenges – the ecological drama of the Anthropocene, and ever-growing global inequality, to name just two looming dangers – requires truly consolidated responses not adequately served by existing institutional solutions, we would do well to take note of how and when these phronetic practices emerge: no blueprints at hand but a clear focus on the priority of our common survival, where we align our actions with our values. The current Ukrainian resistance might provide an example that needs to be closely examined to that end.

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