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# War as a singular crisis? An analysis of the singularity and continuity of crises using the example of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine

## Abstract

When Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, it was seen as a watershed moment in European history, dividing time into "before" and "after". The German chancellor's talk of a "turning point" ("Zeitenwende") underscores the perception of this invasion as a singular crisis event. Its consequences were felt throughout Europe: in political debates, in support for Ukraine, and in the reception of numerous refugees. The force, suddenness, and violence of the attack, as well as the shock to the European peace order, argue for its classification as a singular crisis.

Against this backdrop, in this text I analyse Russia's war against Ukraine according to the criteria of a singular crisis as formulated by Kraemer and Steg (2025) in their essay. At the same time, however, I also consider the crisis from the theoretical perspective of Charles Tilly, who spent his life studying events that could be described as singular crises, but at the same time placed them in the context of a continuum of state formation and social and political change – which is obviously a contradiction.

Using the example of Russia's war against Ukraine, I analyse where singularity and normality or continuity of crises converge. I argue that the singular character of the crisis is strongly influenced by its spatial, temporal, and factual dimensions, which can blur the boundaries between crisis, normality, and 'new normality'. Finally, I argue that crisis response and the concept of resilience are also contingent and need to be integrated in our understanding of singular crises.

**Keywords**: Crisis, war, Ukraine, Tilly, singularity, resilience

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## 1. Introduction

Is Russia's war against Ukraine, which is a full-scale interstate war in Europe as it has not been seen in this intensity and dimension since 1945, a singular crisis? At first glance, there is much to suggest that it is, as this war differs significantly from the previous understanding of crises in the social sciences and has also been

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conceptually understood as a watershed moment – a 'turning point in history'. Klaus Kraemer and Joris Steg (2025) deserve great credit for their approach of differentiating the concept of crisis and focusing it on the phenomenon of singular crises, which seems to better capture a massive war than previous concepts of crisis.

A glance at common social science definitions of crisis makes it clear that this war does not correspond to the common understanding of crisis. It is undoubtedly to the credit of sociology, itself a crisis science, to underline that crises are not exceptions, but rather a core element of society and societal development. A central aspect of crisis is that internally or externally induced irritations, events, or ambivalences make existing orders or mechanisms of order appear inappropriate, ineffective, and unsuitable for solving problems. Luhmann (1991, 148) understood crisis as the disregard of the norms necessary for the continuation of an orderly society. Nassehi (2012, 37) emphasises the lack of a social "overall rationality" in modernity, which makes decisions uncertain, increases the effort required for governance and control, and makes ambiguity more present – which is ultimately experienced as a crisis in this concentration. As Kraemer and Steg also explain at the beginning of their essay, crisis, uncertainty, transformation, and contingency are inextricably linked to social modernity (and postmodernity).

The classical view of crises as part of socialization can thus initially be understood as differentiation, in that crises reveal the differences that orient a system. By establishing social interpretations, norms, and practices along the distinction between normality and crisis, crisis is both a component and an element of society (Luhmann, 2008, 51). Crises contribute to social change when they are responded to, which corresponds to the classical understanding. However, they can also promote social change through anticipation, namely when a phenomenon that could become a crisis and thus poses a danger is recognised as a risk and therefore as a threat to security. Luhmann (2003) thus supplements the pair of concepts of normality/crisis with security/risk, both of which represent an important differentiation. Social (incremental) change only takes place when the difference to normality or security is established, i.e., recognised.

In the event of an interstate war, especially in times when international norms and obligations under international law were considered to be more firmly established than during and before the two world wars of the 20th century, the question arises as to how normality and crisis, as well as security and risk, should be applied and classified in such a way that they can describe the events themselves and the possible consequences of the war for the societies involved. In the following, I will therefore analyse the extent to which Russia's war against Ukraine is a singular crisis, the extent to which the term helps to analyse the war, but also where the term is problematic or needs refinement.

I will contrast the concept of singular crisis with Charles Tilly's understanding of crisis, who in his works on war, contentious politics, protests, and revolutions did

not deal with crisis as a theorem, but as a phenomenon, and considered transformation in the context of crises. It is particularly fascinating that Tilly dealt intensively throughout his work with phenomena that can presumably be regarded as singular crises: wars, revolutions, large-scale protests. However, Tilly did not regard these phenomena as singular or even isolated, but rather examined their structure-forming aspects and thus consciously integrated them into processes of state and society formation (Tilly, 1990). Tilly is credited with the 'bellicistic' understanding of transformation, which holds that wars are central drivers of social and institutional change, since states must acquire and centralise resources and introduce innovative processes in order to wage war. For Tilly, both the causes and effects of wars and crises are related to state capacity. Internal crises, protests, revolutions, and civil wars are often reactions to low state capacity, while state-building processes during and after wars involve the development of and even a push to state capacity (Tilly, 1993, 2004, 2007). The strength or weakness of state capacity – i.e., the capacity for political agency, which also includes institutional and administrative capacity – can therefore provide a window of opportunity for events that challenge claims to power and structures of governance. At the same time, a certain level of institutional openness and lower – but not too low – state capacity offers a window of opportunity for democratization (Tilly, 2007, 136). However, Tilly primarily considers internal processes such as revolutions, ethnic-religious conflicts, and civil wars. His early theory of state formation refers to the emergence of modern states through the paradox that nation states initially arose as a by-product of the accumulation of resources for inter-state wars, and that after the wars, military power was transferred to existing civil institutions – in very long processes. The theory-related questions in this essay are therefore: Is the concept of singular crisis (still) compatible with Tilly's state formation through war theorem and his integration of wars into long processes of social change? How do the two concepts complement each other? What do they exclude? These questions will be explored using the example of one of the most dramatic crisis events of the 21st century: the Russian war against Ukraine.

Several further questions with regard to the concept of the singular crisis arise in relation to this war. It is an interstate war between two (more or less) modern and, as such, established nation states. How are normality and crisis, as well as security and risk, negotiated in this war, and what is perceived as normality and security? How are both concepts disrupted for Ukraine and for Europe, and what understanding of crisis can be derived from this? What short- and long-term changes are induced by the war in Ukraine, as well as in Europe and beyond? And finally, are processes of normalization of the (possibly singular) crisis taking place?

In the field of tension between the extremes of (a) singular crisis and (b) normalisation/normality or (a) complete upheaval according to Kraemer/Steg and (b) structure formation according to Tilly, I will finally introduce another concept in this text that can bridge the gap between the singular crisis and a 'new normal-

ity': resilience. Although resilience is mostly used as a meaningless buzzword or appealing political slogan, I propose it as a sociological concept for analysing and operationalising specific change processes associated with a singular crisis.

## 2. Russia's war against Ukraine: a singular crisis?

Crises are singular and therefore differ from normal crises when after an exogenous shock, normality "is not just temporarily interrupted but collapses from one moment to the next", write Klaus Kraemer and Joris Steg (2025, 5) in their conceptual article on the phenomenon of the singular crises. Singular crises are characterised by exogenous shocks as a starting point of a social process of crises intervention, and by abrupt interruption, extraordinariness and radical uncertainty (see also Kraemer, 2022). In a singular crisis, "established political-institutional rules, economic practices, collectively shared interpretations of the social world, epistemic beliefs, but also the social organisation of space and time, that ordinarily appear stable and immutable, become fundamentally problematic" (Kraemer & Steg, 2025, 5). In a systematizing approach, Kraemer und Steg (2025, ff.) then distinguish the singular crises from normal crises step by step based on nine core criteria. These criteria highlight (1) the high dynamic and spatial and temporal delimitation of singular crises; (2) their abrupt and forceful eruption; (3) the replacement of established principles of order by a primacy of the political; (4) the eruptive social changes they cause; (5) isomorphic adaptation to the 'TINA' principle; (6) a 'path reset' instead of path dependency of institutional and normative changes; (7) sudden re-orientation of narratives, shared interpretations and collective morality; (8) the change from input- and out-legitimation in politics to legitimation through the promise of protection; and (9) the double-sided nature of space as delimited to the crisis but creating realms of restriction, limited access or segregation.

Based on these nine dimensions and criteria, Kraemer and Steg (2025) underline and systematise the concept of a singular crisis, based on the example of the Covid 19 pandemic. These criteria also form a backdrop and a challenge for generalising the concept. Does the system that was developed in relation to the pandemic also apply to other presumably singular crises, such as a full-scale inter-state war? Can the concept be improved and refined, perhaps even corrected, and can war be explained on the basis of this concept? In the following, I will contrast the concept developed by Kraemer and Steg with Russia's war against Ukraine and at the same time relate it to Charles Tilly's crisis sociology. The aim is to critically examine the concept of singular crisis on the basis of a further case and thus contribute to the generalisability of the concept.

### 2.1. Extent and impact

Singular crises are characterised by the fact that they affect a society completely and comprehensively and that they have transnational and global effects. While

the degree of involvement and impact in a normal crisis is limited, singular crises are defined by "their highly dynamic nature and their social as well as spatial and temporal delimitation and dissolution of boundaries" (Kraemer & Steg, 2025, 6). There are overlapping and simultaneous, intertwined, accumulating crisis phenomena, and the crisis also has effects in places where it is not taking place in the narrower sense.

This is undoubtedly the case with Russia's war of aggression. In military terms, Russia's attack affects 'only' Ukraine, but here it affects the entire country, which is the largest European country that is located entirely on the European continent. The fact that it is not safe anywhere in Ukraine is demonstrated both by Russia's attacks with ballistic missiles, drones, cyberattacks, and attacks on wider energy infrastructure throughout the country, and by the fact that travel warnings, for example from the German Foreign Ministry, still apply to the entire country. The impact of the war is also felt in different ways: while the areas under the control of the Ukrainian government are under military attack from Russia, the war in the Russian-occupied areas takes various forms of direct or indirect violence from torture, murder, kidnapping, persecution, discrimination to forced passport changes, control, surveillance, forced pro-Russian education and many more.

The war has numerous transnational and global effects. The term 'Zeitenwende' (turning point, established by German chancellor Scholz in late February 2022) but less political action expressed the concern of the countries of the European Union, the EFTA, and, beyond that, the member states of NATO. Concerns about their own security, anticipated or acute energy supply crises during the decoupling from Russian oil and gas, global food crises due to the difficulty of exporting Ukrainian grain, the admission of up to 7 million refugees from Ukraine, and institutional crises in the architecture of transnational and supranational decision-making processes, such as the adoption of sanctions packages by the Council of the EU, were and are consequential crises. The actual crisis – Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – thus triggered a cascade of subsequent crises that are directly related to the singular crisis. The war thus affects the countries of Europe, North America, and the Global South in different and staircase-like ways, but all are directly linked to Russia's full-scale invasion.

## 2.2. Temporality

Singular crises erupt suddenly, abruptly, and with full force. Latent crisis symptoms would be difficult to anticipate, and the signs do not accumulate into a recognisable pre-crisis phase. Singular crises represent a radical interruption or even suspension of normality.

As compelling and appropriate as the first criterion of a singular crisis is, the second is problematic and deserves some differentiation. The vast majority of crises, wars, and even natural disasters have a certain lead time with signs that could be recog-

nised and identified as an impending crisis. Exceptions are perhaps earthquakes and tsunamis – as was the case with the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake – and very sudden weather phenomena that lead to flood disasters, for example, as was the case with the 2021 Ahr Valley flood, the Elbe floods in 2002, and the Oder floods in 1997. But even volcanic eruptions can usually be predicted to such an extent that the danger becomes a risk that can be contained – as has been the case in southwestern Iceland since 2021, for example. In this respect, the aspect of temporality is less about the problem of there being no signs but more about signs of a crisis being interpreted and understood as such. At this point, it can be argued – following Luhmann – that the assessment of a phenomenon as a risk or danger is contingent, i.e., that the perception (or interpretation) of contingency and damage are linked and that an event is considered contingent in its outcome, but also dependent on decisions. While the danger (e.g., of a volcanic eruption) seems to be objectively present, the risk includes both the consequences of a decision to consciously face the danger and the consequences of not making a decision. In any case, it is perception or interpretation that first makes an event a hazard and then, eventually a risk, but this can also apply to crises: very few crises come completely out of nowhere; it is a question of measurement, the parameters of measurement, and the composition of fragments of knowledge into an interpretable pattern that allows for foresight.

In the case of Russia's war of aggression, there were numerous such moments and signs of crisis – however, they were not accumulated, or at least not sufficiently, to produce a picture that could be recognised and translated to society and politics on a broader scale. The war of aggression against Ukraine did not 'come out of nowhere', but it illustrates a serious failure of perception by Western audiences and a lack of societal recognition and translation of indicators into crisis knowledge. These indicators were obvious by Russia's frequent violations of international law, as well as in preparations within Russia for a war economy and a war society.

The history of Russian violations of international law can be observed since 1994, when Russia attacked the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and ended its independence, which was proclaimed in 1991 in accordance with Soviet legislation, in two brutal wars, killing an estimated 130,000 to 180,000 civilians. Russia's practice of issuing Russian passports to residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from 2002 onwards in order to create a pretext for its 2008 invasion and occupation of parts of Georgia were another sign for Russia's deep disregard of international law. Internal destabilisation as a preparation to military attacks became a typical pattern of Russia's foreign policy towards former Soviet republics, as could be seen in 2012, when the Ukrainian pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych had pushed through a reform that effectively rendered the Ukrainian military incapable of action and therefore, practically defenceless. Only two years later, the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea, the undeclared Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the establishment of de facto states in eastern Ukraine were further

violations of international law, none of which ever had serious consequences for Russia. Quite the opposite, Russia as the aggressor was even invited to participate as a 'mediator' in the peace negotiations of the so-called Minsk processes in September 2014 and February 2015 although it even intensified its military action in Eastern Ukraine during and directly after the talks. Additionally, between 2015 and 2020, Russia carried out numerous airstrikes against targets in Syria to support the dictator Assad. The attacks often hit hospitals and schools, killing thousands of civilians. Military experts concluded in March 2022 that Russia's military aid for the dictator was not at all altruistic, especially since 90% of Russian air force pilots gained combat experience and over 200 Russian weapon systems were tested – knowledge that could be applied in the invasion of Ukraine beginning in February 2022. Although these numerous violations of international law were obvious and experts, military personnel and civil society actors explained Russia's strategically aggressive actions and warned of further breaches of law, these warning signs did not add up to a pattern of Russian war preparations in the public perception.

Parallel to the multiple violations of international law, Russia prepared its economic and financial policy at for a prolonged conflict with Western countries. The accumulation of gold and foreign exchange reserves increased Russia's fiscal resilience; the diversification of trade relations opened up new strategic partnerships beyond Western countries. This deliberate preparation for a war economy was discussed intensively among experts from 2020 onwards, while Germany in particular sought to increase its energy dependence on Russia by commissioning NordStream2 and even called it a 'purely private sector project'.

The essay entitled "On the Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", written in the name of Vladimir Putin and published in July 2021, openly denied Ukraine's right to autonomy, Western orientation, and independence from Russia; the text even negated Ukrainian history and placed it entirely in the context of 'brotherhood' with Russia. What immediately alarmed historians and a few other experts, especially in connection with the increase in military manoeuvres, including the stationing of blood reserves in southwestern Russia and Belarus in late 2021, was largely ignored by political leaders and large sections of European societies.

These signs certainly culminated in a pre-crisis phase, but the indicators of a major war were only discussed among experts. However, those who were able to interpret the various signs of the crises did not succeed to provide knowledge about the escalation into a singular crisis, to contextualise it, and to consolidate this knowledge in such a way that the approaching singular crisis became visible to laypeople and politicians.

Against this background, it seems at least sensible to adjust the aspect of the temporality of singular crises. These crises may be preceded by numerous signs and indicators as well, but they are not seen, are deliberately ignored, or are not translated into an interpretable overall picture – there is a lack of perception and

contingency to anticipate the crisis as such. Expertise and scientific analyses are not sufficiently taken into account, or events are interpreted in isolation without seeking a connecting context. In Charles Tilly's perspective, this means that structural contradictions and tensions are not recognised and/or connected as such – the crisis only 'arises' when these contradictions break out.

### 2.3. Principles of order

The third characteristic of a singular crisis is the abrupt change in principles of order and, above all, the primacy of politics over established social negotiation processes and otherwise autonomously operating subsystems. Kraemer and Steg argue that the established principles of the capitalist economy are being replaced by the primacy of the political while they are maintained in normal crises. As a result, the economy, culture, media, and other systems with their own independent logics would have to subordinate themselves to politics to a greater extent than is normally the case.

The example of a major war of aggression is somewhat more problematic – or at least more complex. On the one hand, a primacy of politics has certainly been evident in Ukraine since 2022, which has been enforced legally, not least through the declaration of martial law and the transfer of extensive powers to the president. At the same time, civil and political freedoms in Ukraine have been restricted, for example, a curfew must be observed, demonstrations and political gatherings are only allowed to take place to a limited extent, and political or religious organisations that cooperate with or express positive views about the aggressor state Russia are prohibited from engaging in public activities until the end of martial law.

On the other hand, this focus ignores the enormous contribution made by society to the defence against Russia and the maintenance of the state. Since 2014, civil society actors in Ukraine have been intensively active in genuinely governmental responsibilities, for example in supporting internally displaced persons, providing humanitarian aid and educational opportunities, digitisation, and material, financial, and medical support for the Ukrainian military. Since 2014, think tanks have increasingly formed reform coalitions to safeguard the goals of the Revolution of Dignity in corresponding legislative packages. Since 2022, these activities have intensified in terms of both quantity and quality and represent the societal side of defending and maintaining Ukrainian statehood.

In addition, civil society action in the above-mentioned areas in 2014 played a decisive role in preventing the Ukrainian state from collapsing at a time of greatest vulnerability and in stopping the Russian attack – in the weeks from the end of February to around May/June 2014, Ukraine's state capacity was almost zero. Civil society actors filled this gap quickly and in a well-organised manner until the structures thus formed could be integrated into state structures (especially in the

military) in the course of 2015-16 and/or registered NGOs had been formed from the informal initiatives.

One conclusion could therefore be that the primacy of politics only applies during a crisis when state capacity is high. Low state capacity, on the other hand, can lead to the crisis becoming unmanageable – or to other, primarily civil society actors stepping in and taking on genuine state functions, at least until sufficient state capacity has been built up. In this respect, an interesting theoretical bridge emerges between the concept of singular crisis and Tilly's crisis sociology if one focuses less on 'politics' and asks instead who has the strongest capacity to act in a crisis and could thus take ownership of it.

## 2.4. Social change

The incremental social change that is common in normal crises and well researched in theory does not occur in singular crises; instead, abrupt change is possible in singular crises. However, since social change is usually an adaptation to gradual challenges, and singular crises do not allow for gradual adaptation, it seems reasonable to rule out social change as a direct effect of singular crises, as Kraemer and Steg do.

Nevertheless, it should not be underestimated that resilience – in the sense of adaptation, coping, or transformative resilience – can also cause social change as an effect. Mechanisms of resilience that aim to minimise the destructive effects of certain disruptive events can involve immediate learning effects and thus also relatively rapid social change. One example is civil society's self-assessment of its capacity for action and the resulting demands for political participation, or the rapid role changes of large sections of the Ukrainian population from civilians to members of the territorial defence forces. New social patterns and their infrastructural support – for example, online teaching, school and academic teaching in bunkers, the construction of new schools and university buildings with air-raid shelters, abrupt changes in logistics routines (towards the massive use of rail transport), digital activism, citizen science, and much more – are adaptation measures to the acute situation of the singular crisis, which include elements of social change. The change is also evident in the level of abstract trust, which has increased significantly both within society and towards certain social institutions and some state organisations (above all, the Ukrainian armed forces). The acceptance of previously marginalised and sometimes heavily discriminated groups has also increased significantly as soon as these groups have become a visible part of Ukraine's defence. The formation of a Roma battalion within the armed forces (and other similar battalions, e.g., Jewish, Crimean Tatar) as well as the public visibility of queer people in the defence forces (the 'Unicorn Battalion' project is one example of this) reflect this specific social change within the singular crisis.

The level of social change could also depend on how deeply affected the respective society is. In Ukraine, which is directly and massively affected by Russia's war of aggression, change is tangible in almost every area. In countries such as Lithuania and Poland, which, in addition to a more concrete threat situation, also have a high level of awareness of Russian aggression as part of their collective memory and have feared becoming victims of Russian warfare since well before 2022, significant changes are also evident – for example, greater acceptance of military spending, individual willingness to join the armed forces, and greater willingness to provide massive support to Ukraine. In Germany, on the other hand, which has so far not considered itself particularly at risk in the broad discussion (although this differs from the assessment of numerous security and experts on Eastern European), no substantial social change due to the war is apparent, especially since Germany has so far only been affected by the cascade effects explained above. However, it is also clear here that the concept of resilience does not work without direct experience of a substantial crisis to which resilience functions as a response. Structural changes and transformative resilience in the sense of crisis prevention have hardly been implemented in Germany to date; the energy transition in 2022 has been the only large-scale adaptation to a (perceptible) crisis so far.

However, social change within resilience practices in a singular crisis align quite well with Tilly's bellicistic approach to social change: The singular crisis of war forces those affected by the aggression to immediately allocate resources and shift practices in order to react on the crisis and keep the core of state and society functioning.

## 2.5. Isomorphism

Isomorphism is the alignment of institutional practices and structures on the basis of coercion, imitation, or normative expectations, and usually involves actors operating in a specific, definable field. Institutional alignment takes place in order to gain competitive advantages, but at the same time leads to greater homogeneity within a social or organisational field. In singular crises, Kraemer and Steg argue, there is no gradual adaptation and homogenisation of the field, but rather an abrupt subordination to certain guiding principles, which in case of doubt can also be enforced by authorities. What became known as the TINA principle in economic crises and was the subordination to hygiene rules in the pandemic is usually the rally-round-the-flag effect in wars, which brings social groups, organisations, and social subsystems together behind the nation-state narrative.

This can be clearly observed in Ukraine; since 2014, there has been an increasingly strong patriotic movement that has rapidly gained dominance. Since 2022, the narrative of collective defence of the country has been the dominant pattern to which many things are subordinated; however, there are additions to this narrative taking place which can be understood as frame bridging processes. Officially, defence efforts imply not only defending the country itself, but also the values that Ukrainian

society has defined as its foundations since the Revolution of Dignity, at the latest: freedom, self-determination, democracy, human dignity, Europeanisation, etc. are clearly part of the defence narrative. Conversely, this means that questioning the defence of Ukraine is also seen as questioning these values, especially freedom and self-determination.

Focusing on a central narrative in the crisis enables the enforcement and legitimisation of martial law and thus strengthens state capacity, but only to the extent that civil society actors, the media, and large sections of society are willing to support it. In this respect, the war had an initial TINA moment, but as the full-scale war of aggression is progressing, it requires additional legitimation and further negotiation.

Tilly might view this TINA moment as a particular opportunity structure in which a central narrative, a crisis response mechanism, or a specific mode of resilience is enforced without planning for lengthy (and usually customary) negotiation phases; however, in the course of the crisis, this somehow 'authoritarian' window of opportunity closes again relatively quickly and requires new negotiation and consultation processes on the level of society.

## 2.6. Path dependency

While social developments normally follow path-dependent trajectories and thus a certain degree of contained contingency, this is not the case in singular crises. According to Kraemer and Steg, these are more characterised by a 'path reset'. A new pattern of political decision-making is established, which in turn creates new path dependencies.

Several such path resets can be observed in Ukraine: First of all, there is the immediate focus on collective defence efforts and the broadly shared will to withstand the Russian aggression, even though the necessary assistance in the form of Western arms deliveries was anything but clear in the early days of the full-scale invasion and has still not reached the level that would be necessary for the effective defence and restoration of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and integrity. Nevertheless, breaking away from the pattern that had been established since Ukraine's independence, which involved Ukraine repeatedly relinquishing its defence capabilities even in the absence of security guarantees from European or American states, has led to a clear and momentous reorientation. In a very short time, Ukraine has not only managed to reorganise and restructure its military, but also to implement technical and logistical innovations in many areas of the defence industry. The construction of cost-effective drone defence systems is one example of this innovation, from which numerous European states are likely to benefit greatly.

Another momentum for a 'path reset' was the Ukrainian government's immediate application for EU candidate status in late February 2022, immediately after the full-scale invasion began. This decision to focus everything on EU accession and to

make the subject of political debate not the question of whether, but only how, was a clear and politically practically irreversible decision that also led very quickly to candidate status, which was granted in July 2022. Once again, the momentum for a landmark decision was seized upon, generating new path dependencies, primarily in foreign policy but increasingly also in domestic policy, especially since Ukraine now has to implement significant reforms in order to be allowed to join the EU, despite the war. Domestically, the government thus complied with the overwhelming majority's desire for accession (and the associated reforms), demonstrated determination and agency to the outside world, and at the same time integrated the aspect of accession into all further discussions on support for Ukraine.

In countries that were only indirectly affected by this singular crisis, there is no evidence of such fundamental changes. The much-cited 'Zeitenwende' may have created a rhetorical moment of path reset, but the term remained largely empty and inconsequential politically, and thus did not even begin to represent a path reset. Rather, with decreasing concern, we can observe a strengthening of political continuity, i.e., path dependencies.

### 2.7. Collective morality

In normal crises, narratives and shared interpretations as part of collective morality are not challenged, but they are replaced literally overnight in a singular crisis. In particular, collective morality would switch from a liberal market narrative to collective anxiety.

The focus of collective morality on the defence of Ukraine has already been mentioned in the section on isomorphism; all other collective moral concepts are currently subordinate to this dominant and widely accepted narrative; at the same time, this focus creates a strong collective identity.

However, the claim made in the singular crisis theorem that collective morality should differ fundamentally from narratives that are dominant in normal times is problematic. In the case of war, there has been an intensification of the central narrative of defending independence, as well as the addition of further aspects; resilience itself is also part of the collective Ukrainian narrative. However, these narratives have also been present since 2014, albeit not as dominant, and they are fed by the narrative of independence, which has been part of the collective Ukrainian memory for several hundred years, by the narrative of democratisation (prevalent since the Orange Revolution in 2004 at the latest), and by the orientation toward Europe and the West, which has gained massive popularity and presence since 2013/14. In this respect, a new level of intensity can be observed here, but not a qualitatively new narrative.

This aspect is consistent with Charles Tilly's theoretical approach, according to which major social changes and upheavals ultimately consist of many processes,

which in turn consist of clearly identifiable mechanisms, some of which may, of course, be reactions to crises and acute disturbances. In his book "Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons" (1984), Tilly traces precisely this macro-micro link, thus illustrating that major processes of change, which are likely to include singular crises, ultimately consist of operationalizable mechanisms and individual moments. This allows for the analysis of continuities in moments of change.

Collective morality in singular crises is different from that in normal times and normal crises, but it requires a narrative basis for legitimacy and social resonance, and should therefore be seen more as an intensification, focusing, or reconstitution of existing narratives than as a crisis-induced new creation of morality.

## 2.8. Modes of legitimation

Political decisions are in normal times and normal crises based on input and output legitimation, thus focusing on legal norms, participation and the prospect of generating benefits. In a singular crisis, the mode of legitimation is the promise of protection, focusing questions of life and death, all or nothing. Political action and its legitimation thus become a zero-sum game in a singular crisis.

It is obvious that in a full-scale war of aggression, we may indeed speak of a matter of life and death for those under attack. In this respect, every political action in the singular crisis of an externally induced total war is legitimised by the immediate need to ensure survival, avoid lethality, and successfully repel the attacks. At the same time, it is clear that there are other modes of legitimation for political action, and that these become more relevant the longer the war lasts. Collective morality in the sense of resilience, but also as the promise to begin reconstruction during the war and ultimately emerge from the crisis stronger and better as a state and society (for example, by becoming a member of the EU, building a resilient economy, etc.), become additional aspects of legitimacy that, while not equal to the survival narrative, become increasingly important as the war goes on. Corresponding political action – such as reforms – is demanded by society, and political action that does not correspond to this is sanctioned or corrected. An impressive example of this negotiation of legitimacy were the immediate and successful civil society protests in July 2025 against the government's attempt to place independent anti-corruption institutions under political control. This shows the narrow limits of the legitimacy of political decisions in war: state activities that comprehensibly and directly serve defence (i.e., survival) are widely seen legitimate; however, this narrative does not serve as justification for domestic and foreign policy decisions that go beyond defence and shrink democratic rights.

## 2.9. Spatial order/dimension

Singular crises are characterised by their spatial dimension, as they take place in (social, material) space, and crisis response and management themselves create social

spaces. But while normal crises can be localised, a singular crisis is characterised by its cross-border, delimited and unbounded nature. Space can become a social realm of restriction, limited access, or segregation.

Space plays a crucial role in Russia's war against Ukraine, as it is a territorial conflict and thus a question of which construct of power can be spatially enforced in certain places. Competing claims to power concern the question of power over space and the construction of new social, cognitive, moral, and identity-based spaces, and, of course, the exercise of power for the material and immaterial exploitation of these spaces.

In Russia's war of aggression, only a small part of eastern and southern Ukraine was initially affected, but the spatial dimension of crisis management affected much larger areas. In 2014, this dimension initially included the whole of the country, as its claim to sovereignty over the entire territory defined by international law was challenged by the Russian invasion and ultimately prevented in the occupied part. However, the spatial dimension also included European states that attempted to respond to the crisis and mediate; ultimately, Belarus was included when its capital, Minsk, was chosen as the supposedly neutral location for possible ceasefire and peace negotiations. The varying degrees to which the war affected different countries were manifested in different spatially oriented roles – which prevented any real attempts at resolution, as these assigned roles helped to obscure the actual interests and capacities of those involved in the war. First and foremost among these were Russia, which had started the war but acted as a mediator, and the then president of Belarus, who was closely allied with Russia and pretended to be a 'neutral host'. In this sense, the beginning of the war of aggression had already created new – one might also say alternative or even fake – socio-spatial realities.

With the full-scale invasion, the entire territory of Ukraine has become a social space of permanent risk of becoming a victim of war. Crisis response and crisis management mainly relate to those regions and cities in Ukraine that are heavily and frequently affected by military attacks; at the same time, a social space of reconstruction and resilience practices is emerging, as reflected in the diverse civil society engagement in the reconstruction and preservation of Ukraine.

At the same time, Russia's war of aggression is not limited to Ukraine. On the one hand, counterattacks are also taking place in Russia, although here too the theatres of war are different: while Russia is targeting social infrastructure and residential buildings indiscriminately, Ukrainian attacks are in fact focusing on military infrastructure and energy infrastructure. Ukrainian resistance in the occupied territories and in Russia itself also creates social spaces and spatial connections to the war – or to the narrative of collective Ukrainian defence, for example through the resistance activities of the organization "Yellow Ribbon". This group is primarily active in marking public space in the occupied territories as Ukrainian – through yellow ribbons woven onto fences, for example, but also through pro-Ukrainian graffiti

and leaflets. This marks public space in the occupied territories as Ukrainian and demonstrates Ukrainian presence despite Russian claims to power.

The socio-spatial consequences of the war and the construction of new spaces can be traced in concentric circles. The Baltic states, Poland, and Finland, which border closely on Russia or Ukraine, have joined forces to become Ukraine's strongest advocates in the 'coalition of the willing'. Germany, France, and the United Kingdom act as rhetorically strong but practically hesitant to cautious advocates of Ukrainian freedom. The EU is primarily influenced by the German and French positions and is also among the rhetorically strong but only moderately consistent supporters. Crisis management measures at the EU level are becoming increasingly abstract, technical, and indirect, so that the creation of a space of concern about Russia's war of aggression and the countermeasures taken here are only indirectly perceptible and, moreover, fragile in its construction.

In Tilly's analysis of war and revolutions, space is a decisive factor. Rule and claims to rule focus on specific territories and are condensed into a space – rule over a specific space is thus institutionalised (Tilly, 1990). Wars arise in order to reverse this institutionalization from outside and to establish one's own patterns of institutionalization in a specific space. According to Tilly, this competition for space underlies both wars (and the subsequent formation of states) and revolutions (Tilly, 1993). The latter dynamic can be clearly seen in Ukraine, especially since all three major revolutions in modern Ukraine (1990, 2004, 2013/14) began in the country's largest cities and were also decisively carried out there. The revolutions – especially the Revolution of Dignity in 2013/14 – were ultimately a struggle for dominance in the public and social space, which was physically fought between civil society and the militias of the later deposed president. Tilly's understanding of space supports the assumption about the significance of space in singular crises, since social space is created by the crisis event itself. In the case of Ukraine, these are alternative patterns of rule enforced by violence in the occupied territories; but Ukrainian resistance also has spatial connotations and refers to the legitimacy of Ukraine's claim to sovereignty over its territory as guaranteed under international law, including the temporarily occupied territories. At the same time, the outcome of these spatially connoted claims to power also depends on the behaviour of other states, thus involving further social spaces. Russia's increasingly frequent attacks, such as espionage, drone strikes, airspace violations, parcel bombs, etc., in countries west and north of Ukraine are expanding the social space of the war and Russia's claim to power to these countries, even though the means and ideas for enforcing power here are likely to differ (for now) from those related to Ukraine.

## 3. Summary & Discussion

Is Russia's war against Ukraine to be understood as a singular crisis in the sense of Kraemer and Steg? And if so, to what extent do the parameters of the singular crisis

correspond to the phenomenology of war, and to what extent can Charles Tilly's perspective of war as part of large structures and processes (Tilly, 1984) be linked to the theorem of the singular crisis? What insights does this connection provide?

At first, it should be noted that war corresponds to the concept of singular crisis in terms of scale and effect; it is a decisive event that completely challenges previous routines and certainties, especially for the society most affected – Ukraine. In addition, war results in a cascade of crises that affects both Ukraine and other countries and societies.

There is also broad agreement between empirical phenomena and theoretical assumptions regarding the characteristic of path dependency or path reset caused by the singular crisis; in many respects, Ukraine is facing new path dependencies that were not foresee-able before 2022, and certainly not before 2014 what marks the begin of the Russian war of aggression.

The aspect of establishing a collective morality and corresponding patterns of legitimacy in relation to a central goal – that of defence and thus survival – has been clearly evident in political narratives, practices, and society's self-image since 2022. It can also be observed that crisis management creates a new spatial order and categorising space, for example, into frontline areas, occupied areas, other endangered areas within Ukraine (i.e., the entire country excluding frontline and occupied areas), as well as areas outside Ukraine directly or indirectly affected by aggression, plus areas of support (or refusal of support) as new social spaces or cognitive maps.

However, some features of the singular crisis seem to be more debatable and need differentiation. As I could show, Russia's war had a number of clues, indications, and preparations that were known and that needed to be pieced together and interpreted – but this essentially only led to expert discussions and did not find its way into public debate. This aspect underscores my thesis that even singular crises do not usually 'happen' suddenly, but are only *perceived* as something sudden when experts fail to provide knowledge (or are actively prevented from doing so) about the escalation into a singular crisis, contextualising it, and condensing it in such a way that the approaching singular crisis also becomes visible to laypeople and politicians. In this respect, it would be worth discussing how strict the criteria of temporality and unexpected outbreak are.

Furthermore, my analysis showed that establishing the primacy of politics as the dominant organising principle in a singular crisis is only applicable to a limited extent and depends on state capacity as well as the capacity and role of other actors, such as civil society. In the case of Ukraine, with a strong and capable civil society and relatively weak state institutions, agency does not necessarily have to shift solely to politics; civil society actors can play a decisive role where state agencies leave a

vacuum. At this point, an integrative approach that takes Tilly's state capacity into account might be useful.

With regard to social change and institutional alignment (isomorphism), it seems appropriate to consider the change that the crisis response can initiate. Resilience as a crisis response initially means finding acute modes of adaptation and coping, but transformative resilience is also relevant as it already contains the foundations for future structural changes in the response and is geared towards designing reconstruction in such a way that future structures are less susceptible to disruption. This also applies to social and socio-psychological structures. Social change takes place within the framework of resilience and also has a different dynamic than a singular crisis, yet the two are causally related. Isomorphism in acute war does not imply that specific patterns are predetermined and then unchangeable, but rather that a prioritisation of what to keep running takes place, while other issues, narratives, and practices can be negotiated over time.

Finally, it should be noted that the duration and also the 'location', i.e., the temporal and spatial dimensions of the singular crisis, are not entirely clear. Was the singular crisis only February 24, 2022, when Russia began its full-scale invasion? After more than 3.5 years of full-scale war, can we still speak of a singular crisis? If not, how can the massive changes that have taken place since February 25, 2022, in Ukraine, Russia, European countries, and the EU be attributed to this one moment? If so, what contradictions arise between the theory of singular crisis and the ongoing war?

I argue for the assumption that the ongoing war itself is a singular crisis because there is no normality and no reliable routines in war, but that it might make sense to differentiate the criteria in detail and, if necessary, to weight them. This could be done through quantification or scaling, but it seems more appropriate to broaden the perspective qualitatively – and thus ask what effects the singular crisis has on social entities depending on their spatial and factual involvement, what direct or abstract patterns of interaction arise as a result of the crisis, what new combinations of narratives, interactions, structures, or institutions the singular crisis might trigger, which path dependencies led to the crisis (but may have been overlooked or negated), and which patterns of resilience become visible in the crisis. More generally speaking, it might be worth to consider even singular crises in the context of *big structures, large processes, and huge comparisons*, thereby integrating Charles Tilly's sociology into the analysis.

Singular crises need to be recognised as such, i.e., they must be recognisable life-world-based and thus subjectively addressable; otherwise, they might be understood as normal crises, which will have an impact on crisis management and also on prevention and resilience. Making singular crises recognisable is a task for various actors in public discourse (experts, media, politicians) and should be included in

the analysis as a narrative construction of crises: How, in what temporal, spatial, and factual context is it possible to articulate singular crises?

## 4. Crisis management: Resilience as analytical concept

Finally, the crisis management mode of resilience should be addressed. Even though resilience is a popular term that is widely overused, it still has considerable potential as an analytical concept. If it is understood not as normative, but analytical concept, resilience refers to the ability of a system to absorb some disturbance whilst maintaining its core properties (Thorén & Olsson, 2017). Resilience analysis therefore consists of regarding four "C"s: crisis, core, coping, and changes. Coping and changes focus on the elements that are subject to a necessary adaption in order to preserve the core of a system. This differentiation is crucial as is also distinguishes resilience from transition: As long as a core of a given entity remains unchanged while peripheral elements are changed, we speak about resilience. If the core of a social entity is changed, we speak about transition which means a complete turnover of these core features. Both can happen in the course of reacting to a singular crisis.

Coping and changes as crisis management can exist in three modes: First, the most direct variant is adaptation to disruptions, changed circumstances, or effects of crises that an individual or a collective considers irreparable. Adaption is often short-term and reversible in the way that changes can also be revoked again. Second, overcoming the crisis and the specific disruption means restoring the initial state, but also includes discursive resilience – i.e., a narrative about the cause of the crisis and possible strategies of endurance and mastering. Third, social change and long-term structural changes are made possible by transformative resilience, where actors learn from damage caused or crises they experienced, identifiy weaknesses and vulnerabilities, anticipate possible future crises and damage, and implement structural changes on this basis. Resilience is transformative – and thereby, a subtype of transformation – when several characteristics or elements are changed sustainably and simultaneously in order to minimise weak points, but the core of the entity remains unchanged. Transformative resilience therefore always requires a discussion about what belongs to the unchangeable core and which elements can be changed in order to preserve the core. Transformative resilience aims to strengthen collectives or individuals by reducing potential vulnerability – the danger is tried to be rendered harmless by taking precautions against the anticipated destruction. In the case of volcanic eruptions or earthquakes, this can take the form of appropriate construction methods, regular measurements and surveillance, and detailed evacuation plans; in the case of a possible war of aggression, it can take the form of an appropriate security architecture, emergency plans, and influence over the resources that would be allocated to make war possible – both material and immaterial.

Coping and change as crisis management strategies and resilience modes also raise new questions, particularly in the area of transnational phenomena such as interstate war. Resilience implies both discourse – about what is an irrevocable core of a social entity and what are changeable non-core features – and agency for these changes. As the international arena is characterised by contradicting narratives and non-shared understandings, for example on the commitment to international law, on the role of hegemony or cooperation, or on the prohibition of aggression, resilience analysis might show that singular crises evoke the next singular crisis. One conceivable approach to a sociology of international relations would be to consider resilience versus transition of international norms, structures and practices as an aspect or consequence of singular crises. Russia's instrumentalization of the ambivalence of international legal norms to justify its violation of international law can thus possibly be conceived as the trigger for a fundamental transition of international relations, the core of which is controversial and thus deprived of resilience. And this might bring us full circle to Charles Tilly's nation-building theory: singular crises such as wars contribute to the formation of new large structures, also beyond the nation state.

Therefore, I argue that a singular crisis may lead either to transition or resilience of social entities – they may change societies, state structures or the international system fundamentally or their non-core characteristics may be changed in transformative resilience. Singular crises do not simply (or abruptly) end, instead, they emerge into a passage to a 'new normality', and this passage could be resilience.

However, key prerequisites for resilience are aspects such as capacity, trust, legitimacy, collective narratives/morals, and broad interaction. Charles Tilly, who did not explicitly study crises nor resilience, but who has proposed a relational understanding of politics, described the mechanisms of democratic cooperation as the decoupling of public political processes from categorical inequality, the integration of trust networks into politics, and the dismantling of autonomous centres of power in favour of establishing broad, equal, and mutually binding trust networks (Tilly, 2007). At the core of Tilly's state building and democratization theory are mutually binding consultations – whose quality might also have an impact on how crises are dealt with. Following Tilly, we may argue that singular crises can have lasting effects on transformative resilience if networks of consultation and trust can be established within crisis management – in which case, however, the singular crisis becomes the trigger for social change, it becomes manageable, and thus turns into a 'normal' crisis that can be addressed with newly established crisis management tools. These can be seen as the results and achievements of transformative resilience in and after a singular crisis.

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