

1,000 DAYS OF EXISTENTIAL PURPOSE



Authors

Andriy Rozhdestvensky, Sofiya Opatska,
and Gerard Seijts

Studies and countless stories illustrate that internalized purpose helps humans flourish across disciplines and spheres. The Russia-Ukraine war is a dramatic example of how purpose can shape our ability to respond to the events in our lives.

After the start of the invasion on 24 February 2022, analysts estimated that the Russian Armed Forces would be capable of capturing Kyiv and removing the Ukrainian government within three days. As we write this, Ukrainians are approaching 1,000 days of bloodshed, tens of thousands killed, separated families, anger, and anxiety. They are living through unimaginable hardship with exceptional fortitude, with no end in sight.

More than 10 million people fled their homes during the war. Roads, power plants, schools, hospitals, museums, and universities have been damaged or destroyed, leaving millions with disrupted services. Morale among citizens and soldiers remains high, but everyone is battling physical and mental fatigue. How can soldiers be inspired to continue to fight and defend Ukraine? How can societal leaders come to terms with the damage inflicted on them and then make the substantive shift of returning to a peacetime leadership approach equipped to rebuild and regenerate the country?

Research shows that the impact of purpose on individuals and their communities can be profound.¹⁻³ On 20 May 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was sworn in as Ukraine's head of state. Zelenskyy and his administration had formulated many objectives for his first term, including economic betterment of ordinary citizens and building a non-corrupt and responsive government. His focus, and indeed purpose, changed dramatically on 24 February 2022 when Russia launched the full-scale invasion.

In one of his early addresses to the nation and the world, Zelenskyy said, "We are fighting for our rights, for our freedoms, for our life."⁴ Leadership is about clarity of purpose, which focuses people and energizes them to contribute. But how is purpose enacted during the most dramatic circumstance: an existential threat? Resilience is key to adapting to the most dire situations; it feeds purpose. Dunja Mijatović, former Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, noted that the resilience of the Ukrainian people stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of freedom.

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To discover the origins of this remarkable resilience, we interviewed five Ukrainian leaders (from parliament, armed forces, church, business, the not-for-profit sector, and academia). We share their hard-won insights in this article, offering lessons to those who are ready to engage in purpose-driven leadership.

WHERE DOES UKRAINIAN RESILIENCE COME FROM?

Borys Gudziak, Metropolitan-Archbishop of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia and president of Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv, said:

Many Ukrainians recognize this constant fight: every day you wake up, and it's a fight for your right to live. Ukrainians are emerging from a totalitarian and genocidal legacy.

For decades, people in Ukraine lived under a totalitarian regime that repressed the language, literature, and church and eliminated large parts of the cultural intelligentsia (artists, poets, and writers). In the 20th century, more than 15 million Ukrainians were killed. Ukraine faced a genocide in the 1930s: the Holodomor was a man-made famine perpetrated by Joseph Stalin from 1932 to 1933 to annihilate the Ukrainian nation.

Gudziak further noted:

We are seeing this attempt to annihilate the nation once again. Consider what happened in Irpin, Iziium, Bucha, and other towns that were under occupation. Once these towns were liberated, people found mass graves. Citizens were raped, tortured, and disfigured before they were killed. This is what Russian occupation means. So it's really freedom or death. We have no other way out. If Putin succeeds, there will be no Ukraine.

Andy Hunder, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Ukraine, located in Kyiv, says businesses and their people have shown great resilience during the war, in part thanks to historical events:

Our Internet works better than in many cities across Europe. The banking sector works seamlessly. The infrastructure in Kyiv continues to work. Many organizations were proactive and preparing for a full-scale invasion. The decision was made to move many of the services into the cloud immediately. The safest place for infrastructure during World War II was in the tunnels. Today, in Ukraine, the safest place is in the cloud.

People come to work every day. Organizations are successful, often without electricity from the grid. How do you run a McDonald's restaurant without electricity? You need to have generators in place. Employees need to understand what to do in the event of an air-raid alarm. Employees are trained to shut down restaurants immediately and help customers evacuate. Once the threat has passed and the "all clear" has been given, restaurants typically reopen within an hour.

A MINDSET CHANGE

Hunder spoke about a change in mindset among many CEOs:

Some CEOs had a reputation of having big egos. This mindset has made way for a deep sense of humility. When you're attending a funeral, standing over the coffin of someone you knew, it gets quite personal. What

do you say to someone who has lost so much? You realize how fragile we are and how quickly we can lose what we have. We need to be grateful for the blessings we have.

The number one question for leaders and citizens is, “What is the right thing to do?” Then, we must understand how history will judge us. Many CEOs now see their purpose as boosting the economy, generating revenues, and paying taxes to keep the country from tipping over. If there’s no economy, we won’t be able to pay pensions. We won’t be able to pay teachers. We won’t be able to fund the military.

People understand that this is an existential war. Hence, purpose was suddenly and broadly shared. Putin and the Russian Armed Forces are trying to annihilate us. We are an independent nation, a sovereign state. It is therefore no surprise that many citizens volunteered from the first days of the war. People have a strong desire to defend the country, to fight to protect their families, and to take their children to safety. People are considering where they can contribute the most.

Roman Lozynskyi, a member of Ukraine’s parliament, volunteered to join the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and served in the Special Operations Forces. He articulated that it is your responsibility as a citizen to determine in what country you want to live. Since Russia embarked on a full-scale invasion to destroy Ukraine, he saw only one option: fight to protect his family, his friends, and the country. Lozynskyi posted the following shortly after pushing the Russian Armed Forces back around the city of Mykolaiv in the fall of 2022:

Our offensive is about superhuman effort and chivalry. It is about battlefield losses, and a lot of eyes full of fear, but there is a lot more faith, and love, in our hearts. It’s about taking a step without knowing if there is a mine or tripwire ahead; but every step you take is confident and resolute because you are walking on your land, in your own home.

AUTHOR NOTE

Andriy Rozhdestvensky produced the documentary [Ukraine: A Leadership Exam](#). The filming of the documentary took place during the summer of 2023 and highlights the stories of three leaders — representing different professions, with distinct backgrounds and outlooks on life. Their leadership led to results that practically no one expected. Resilience and purpose play a prominent role in their success.

Yaroslav Rushchysyn, a member of Ukraine’s parliament and businessman, put it this way:

You have to leave the world around you in a better condition than before you came to it. This principle should drive our behavior during our lifetime. That’s why our existence is paramount, as is the well-being and happiness of our children, our grandchildren, and those Ukrainians after them. This is why we are fighting now. We know that we set a high goal and that we could die during this war. But this is all part of the “wish for greatness” that patriarch Josyf Slipyj once coined — that we will be able to live peacefully and decide our own fate.

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EXISTENTIAL PURPOSE’S ROLE IN DAILY ACTIVITIES

When asked how existential purpose plays a role in day-to-day activities, Gudziak responded:

My personal purpose has been key and clear. As soon as I graduated from my doctoral studies at Harvard University, I was asked to work at Ukrainian Catholic University. Eventually, I became the rector of the re-founded university in 2002. I considered working at Ukrainian Catholic University a once-in-a-millennium kind of opportunity. A totalitarian system had collapsed without great bloodshed. There was great hunger for openness to learning and connection. In that context, it was possible to develop a university from scratch.

We were trying to reinvent the university. We sought to offer an education and a formation that is holistic, that sees the human being not only as a brain to be programmed, but as an integrated being with mind, soul, body, and spirit. I believe that, today, the community atmosphere of Ukrainian Catholic University and its programs are a model not only for higher education, but for many public, private, and not-for-profit sector institutions across Ukraine.

I tell students that I hope the university prepares them for good family life because family life is a challenge, and many children today are scarred by the wounds occurring in their families. We hope individuals are open to something that will give them a more holistic vision, an understanding, and, hopefully, a competence that benefits families, communities, and Ukraine.

Others had to find that purpose amid the full-scale invasion. Kateryna Glazkova, CEO of Union of Ukrainian Entrepreneurs, explained that, initially, she was frustrated and even felt guilty:

I thought I was not doing enough for my country to win the war. I am not in the army, and I was not involved in big, tactical projects. I felt compelled to do more because Ukraine is my country, my life, my future, and the future of my kids. Then I began to realize that I must focus on the things I know I can do best: connecting people and representing Ukrainian business abroad. I am not on the front line with soldiers. However, through my ongoing activities at the Union of Ukrainian Entrepreneurs, I can inspire and support the leaders working to defeat Russia's invasion.



Lozynskyi voiced a similar sentiment:

I changed roles; I moved from parliament to the armed forces and back to parliament. I had to reflect where I could be most effective, to get the best results for the people I care about. The behaviors I display as a soldier and parliamentarian are different, but the underlying purpose is the same.

Rushchyshyn reflected on how his personal purpose changed when he made the transition from business leader to parliament member. He became deeply motivated to create supportive business environments for entrepreneurs, including complete legal frameworks, quality infrastructure, prudent taxation, and stable institutions:

We must create markets because if everyone wants to leave this country, there won't be much of a future. That's why I became involved in politics: to create additional value. This was really important to me because someone once told me that it is virtually impossible to be happy in an unhappy country.

Then I started to think bigger! I wanted to build trust up. There are small islands of trust in our communities. I wanted to connect those islands and create even more trust. We have institutions in Ukraine that have this trust, including academic institutions, NGOs, and anticorruption institutions. This became a focus of mine: helping create enough high-quality institutions to facilitate a well-functioning economy and generate wealth for people. This ecosystem will increase trust in our society and, importantly, get me closer to my personal purpose: shaping a happy country with happy people.

PURPOSE & LEADERSHIP

There is a clear connection between purpose and leadership. Leadership not only defines purpose, it reinforces and inspires it. Zelenskyy is a compelling example of a leader working through a profoundly challenging circumstance: an unprovoked war and the concomitant loss of human lives.

Throughout the war, Zelenskyy has inspired and mobilized collective action against Russia at an unprecedented breadth, depth, and pace by rallying Ukraine's citizens and its military, as well as galvanizing most of the international community. Zelenskyy's famous response of "I need ammunition, not a ride" when offered the chance by US officials to flee advancing Russian troops, is one of his defining moments.

Noted Hunder:

The leadership was here, and they projected calm. The expression "cometh the hour, cometh the man" is appropriate for this situation.

The positive relational energy Zelenskyy generated led people to believe they mattered and that they were needed to achieve a purpose. Many stories of inspiration followed, including one about the soldiers on Snake Island, a Ukrainian outpost in the Black Sea. One of the soldiers, Roman Hrybov, didn't hold back when threatened by a Russian warship. A Russian officer said, "This is a Russian military warship. I suggest you lay down your weapons and surrender to avoid bloodshed and needless casualties. Otherwise, you will be bombed." Hrybov responded: "Russian warship, go f*** yourself." Such defiance served as a boost for morale among Ukrainians.

Glazkova notes the importance of entrepreneurs as role models for people, not only for employees or business partners, but for people within their communities. She and her colleagues conducted a survey shortly before the invasion. Entrepreneurs of medium-sized businesses received the highest trust scores, second only to the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Entrepreneurs tend to be reliable partners for government and citizens: they are known to prepare food for people and buy medicines for hospitals. When Glazkova asked Promodo CEO Alexandr Kolb why he was staying in Kharkiv amid constant Russian bombardments, he said that he believes his role is to be an optimist and to radiate this to the people around him.

Rushchyshynn said he firmly believes that sacrifice or selflessness (as demonstrated by entrepreneurs) helps build trust. He is not talking only about putting one's life on the line; small acts can foster trust as well. Individuals are more likely to embrace purpose if they believe their leaders, colleagues, neighbors, and friends have their best interests in mind (such as leading by example or providing ongoing support to people in need). Rushchyshynn unequivocally stated that without deeply rooted trust in society and its myriad institutions in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors, it is hard to excel at anything as a country, let alone survive an existential war.

EXISTENTIAL PURPOSE BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER

In Ukraine, people from a variety of backgrounds have come together through an overarching, existential purpose. They are playing different roles — with a set of day-to-day activities — to create a better, stronger country for future generations. Lozynski talked about the role that people play in this:

We are fighting the Russian Armed Forces in constant deficit, notably lacking weapons systems: tanks, drones, artillery, and so on. But what inspires me to continue to fight and defend Ukraine is our people. We are fighting for the same goal, and we are working through a common experience that builds strong bonds. The will of the people is on full display.

Gudziak talked about four key concepts: solidarity, subsidiarity, common good, and human dignity. For example, almost 1,000 days into the full-scale invasion, observers are seeing extraordinary solidarity. On 8 July 2024 in Kyiv, Okhmatdyt, Ukraine's largest pediatric clinic, renowned for its cancer treatment, was targeted by a Russian missile attack that killed at least four people and left many injured. Ukrainian organizations collected more than US \$6 million within two days to support the hospital and children.

Throughout the war, observers also see the principle of subsidiarity at work:

Subsidiarity means bringing decisions and responsibility down to a more popular level, not waiting for instructions from our president or someone else at the top of a pyramid to solve the problems we encounter. Ukrainians across the country, at all levels, took initiative inspired by purpose and success stories. Subsidiarity (the assignment of tasks and responsibilities) is most visible and effective when there is trust among individuals and institutions.

Solidarity and subsidiarity help us defend human dignity and work toward a common good. Ukrainians who took to the squares for peaceful protests throughout the history of independence (the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2014) were consciously or unconsciously formed by these values, and this has influenced the entire country. I believe these principles are not purely religious; they are deeply human and foundational to the development of a civil society.

Hunder came to Ukraine in 1996 and noted that he has never seen Ukrainians as united as they are now. He also realizes that people are wondering what will happen after the war. Rebuilding the country will require a clear and united vision:

There are all kinds of temptations to go back to some of the old ways, including corruption. We need to ask ourselves what the right thing is. I think there will be those that say, "Well, here's a shortcut. Let's do this and generate some short-term gains."

There will be a lot of difficult, unpopular moves ahead, especially as we prepare for the biggest recovery of a nation in Europe since World War II. We need to get ready for that. The people who will be in government after the war, who are responsible for the infrastructure and many other portfolios, are going to face challenging situations. We need to find champions, people who are inspired by the idea of recovery and the opportunities ahead to create a better, stronger country for future generations.

CONCLUSION

The Russia-Ukraine war is a compelling illustration of how purpose has a profound effect on individuals and their communities. The observations we gathered from conversations with five leaders speak to 1,000 days in the life of an ecosystem of purpose.

We urge readers to identify their own takeaways, but one key insight is that, fundamentally, a triad of sacrifice, solidarity, and subsidiarity can safeguard a common future — not merely of individuals, but of society — that would be otherwise in peril. The role of deep, personal leadership in facilitating this triad through inspiration, building resilience, and fostering trust can never be underestimated.

Scientist and humanist Carl Sagan wrote, "The significance of our lives and our fragile realm derives from our own wisdom and courage. We are the custodians of life's meaning." Especially in times of adversity, purpose is a crucial element in forging a meaningful path forward. "There is no compelling evidence for a cosmic Parent who will care for us and save us from ourselves," Sagan concluded. "It is up to us."⁵

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About the authors

Andriy Rozhdestvensky is Professor of Leadership and Executive Director of the Center for Leadership for Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU). He is a member of the Supervisory Board of Transparency International in Ukraine and a business consultant. Previously, Dr. Rozhdestvensky served as profiler-analyst for the Israeli security service, engaging in counterterrorism activities, including the establishment of special communications and negotiations. He later became an HR partner for JSC Oschadbank, adapting western HR tools to the realities of a state-owned enterprise and participating in other HR-related activities. Dr. Rozhdestvensky is coauthor of two documentary films dedicated to leadership as well as several business cases. He earned a master's degree in psychology from the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, Ukraine, and a PhD from GS Kostyuk Institute of Psychology of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine. He can be reached at arozhdestvensky@lvbs.com.ua.

Sofiya Opatska is Vice Rector for Strategic Development at Ukrainian Catholic University (UCU). She is Founding Dean and Head of the Board of UCU Business School. Ms. Opatska is also VP of the board of directors of the European Federation of Catholic Universities (FUCE) and a board member for the first Impact Investment project in Ukraine Promprylad. She has more than 25 years' experience in business education, educational institution management, and the corporate sector. Ms. Opatska continues to be a change agent in the Ukrainian education system as well as in Ukraine's development of business education, where she brings a deep understanding of the challenges of fast-growing organizations. Ms. Opatska's research and teaching focus on resilience, crisis management, and leadership in Ukrainian companies during the ongoing war. She can be reached at sopatska@ucu.edu.ua.

Gerard Seijts is Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Ivey Business School, Western University, Canada. He was the inaugural Executive Director of the Ian O. Ihnatowycz Institute for Leadership. Dr. Seijts is coauthor of several books, including *Leadership on Trial: A Manifesto for Leadership Development*; *Good Leaders Learn: Lessons from Lifetimes of Leadership*; *Developing Leadership Character*; *The Character Compass: Transforming Leadership for the 21st Century*; and *Character: What Contemporary Leaders Can Teach Us About Building a More Just, Prosperous, and Sustainable Future*. His award-winning research on leadership and leader character is published in top management journals, and he has authored numerous articles in practitioner journals. Dr. Seijts has designed and led executive education programs for public, private, and not-for-profit sector organizations around the world. He received a PhD in organizational behavior and human resource management from the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at GSeijts@ivey.ca.

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