Received: 30 May 2024 | Revised: 5 March 2025 | Accepted: 29 March 2025

DOI: 10.1002/gsj.1523

SMS | Global Strategy Journal WILEY

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Resilience in times of war: How Ukrainian exporting SMEs enhance relational factors with foreign partners

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Funding information
Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness, Grant/Award Number: PI2020-118340RB-100; Generalitat Valenciana, Grant/Award Number: CIAICO-2022065

Abstract

Research Summary: This study explores how relational capital fosters Ukrainian exporters resilience through anticipation, coping, and pre-adaptation during wartime. Motivated by the limited understanding of how SMEs face extreme crises, we conducted 19 in-depth interviews with Ukrainian exporters and seven follow-up interviews a year later. Our findings reveal a gap in risk assessment and contingency planning, underscoring the need for proactive crisis strategies. Communication, mutual commitment, and trust emerge as key relational mechanisms that enable exporters to manage cross-border challenges effectively in high-risk environments. Cooperation serves both as a coping mechanism and a driver of strategic adaptation, enabling firms to adjust business models, enter new markets, and sustain competitiveness despite ongoing conflict. This study highlights the critical role of international partnerships in resilience-building for SMEs.

Managerial Summary: This study offers key insights for managing crises in war-affected areas, providing practical guidance for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. It emphasizes the importance of a structured approach, including anticipation, coping, and adaptation, to enhance resilience and strategic responses during conflicts. Critical to the anticipation stage is integrating risk management strategies with proactive planning and balancing trust with foreign partners, which prepares organizations to address potential challenges effectively. During the coping stage, prioritizing transparent communication and adopting flexible strategies while honoring commitments are crucial for maintaining operational continuity. The pre-adaptation stage focuses on developing long-term strategies and robust partnerships, essential for facilitating strategic transformation. Collectively, these stages form a comprehensive framework for dealing with the complexities of war-induced crises.

KEYWORDS

exporters' resilience, relational capital, war-exogenous crisis

1 | INTRODUCTION

The ongoing war in Ukraine has profoundly reshaped global trade dynamics, introducing unprecedented challenges for international relations and economic stability. The World Trade Organization (2023) identifies this conflict as a significant exogenous shock, with severe implications for Ukraine and ripple effects across global markets. Trade disruptions have intensified, leading to supply chain breakdowns, escalating inflation, and shortages of critical raw materials. Furthermore, restrictions on Ukrainian exports and imports, along with surging energy costs, have increased production expenses and intensified competition in affected sectors (Kilfoyle, 2023).

In this context, resilience has become essential for Ukrainian firms as they confront the severe and unpredictable consequences of war (Duchek, 2020; Su & June, 2023).

Resilience, a multidimensional concept encompassing a system's capacity to react, adapt, and recover from shocks (Ponomarov & Holcomb, 2009), is critical to sustaining operations under such extreme conditions. While international business (IB) research has extensively examined how multinational enterprises (MNEs) build resilience through prior experience, strong international relationships, host-country governance factors, and strategic risk management (Ciravegna et al., 2023; Nielsen et al., 2023; Oh & Oetzel, 2011), there has been comparatively little focus on the resilience strategies of exporting small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These SMEs, unlike MNEs, often lack extensive resources and are heavily reliant on foreign relationships to withstand disruptions (Fath et al., 2021; Linnenluecke, 2017).

Exporting SMEs face distinct cross-border challenges that complicate efforts to maintain stability. Unlike purely domestic firms, these SMEs operate in an international scenario that exposes them to currency fluctuations (Kumar & Rao, 2015), supply chain dependencies, and interconnected risks that can abruptly shift trade conditions, market access, and partnerships (Pallás-Rocafull et al., 2024). Under ordinary conditions, developing strong relationships with foreign clients and partners is recognized as a critical driver of SMEs' export performance (Aykol & Leonidou, 2018; Leonidou et al., 2014). Relational mechanisms act as shield to opportunistic behaviors and foster a conducive environment for sustainable partnerships (Obadia et al., 2017). Shared governance, common goals, as well as cooperative efforts play an important role in areas such as product development, communication, promotion, and distribution (Kantaruk Pierre et al., 2024; Obadia & Vida, 2024). Resilience for exporters, therefore, requires more than internal adjustments; it involves facing complex dependencies with foreign partners. The international context adds layers of complexity to resilience-building, as exporters must manage and sustain these relationships across borders, often with partners who may not fully feel the impact of the crisis but are integral to the firm's stability. Under adverse conditions (such as war), relational capital, rooted in trust, cooperation, and shared understanding (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), becomes essential, especially when local support structures are compromised and external alliances become a key source of strength.

Thus, our research takes a novel perspective by examining the resilience of exporting SMEs, specifically through the lens of relational capital, in response to a domestic crisis.

While IB research has focused primarily on organizational responses to violent disruptions within host countries (e.g., Dai et al., 2013; Darendeli & Hill, 2016; Nielsen et al., 2023; Oh & Oetzel, 2011; Oh & Oetzel, 2017; Soule et al., 2014; Yala et al., 2018), our study shifts attention to the unique challenges exporters face when a crisis originates in their home country. Specifically, we explore how the quality of relationships between Ukrainian exporters and their international partners enhances resilience during wartime. We investigate the role of relational factors in enabling exporters to anticipate, cope with, and adapt to the crisis precipitated by the war. This focus on relational dynamics aims to identify specific practices and mechanisms that exporters use to leverage their international networks in a conflict.

The contributions of this study are twofold. Theoretically, our research introduces a unique perspective as the first to investigate how exporters' relational capital supports resilience in a wartime context. By bridging the gap between existing IB research on organizational adaptation to foreign disruptions (e.g., Oh & Oetzel, 2017; Soule et al., 2014) and the underexplored area of resilience in domestic crises, this study enriches the theoretical understanding of both resilience and relational capital. This investigation expands knowledge of resilience-building mechanisms, underscoring relational capital as a critical resource for firms facing intense and uncertain environments. Specifically, our findings emphasize the importance of anticipatory capabilities for wartime preparedness and demonstrate how communication, trust, and mutual commitment with foreign business partners are essential for resilience. These cooperative dynamics strengthen exporters' ability to manage crises and reveal strategic pathways for adaptation and long-term transformation.

Empirically, this study offers insights from 26 semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian exporters, capturing their strategies, challenges, and adaptive practices during active conflict. These first-hand insights provide valuable knowledge for researchers and practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners developing crisis management strategies for firms in war-affected regions. By focusing on these rare, high-impact events and using qualitative methodologies to capture them accurately, our research answers recent calls for a deeper understanding of resilience in global management (Beamish & Hasse, 2022).

Ultimately, this approach supports evidence-based decision making for firms operating in complex, high-risk environments.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Resilience in the face of exogenous shocks

Exogenous shocks are defined as "events that are difficult to predict or anticipate, external to organizations and independent of market forces, with direct and indirect severe repercussions on organizations and their operational environment" (Meschi, 2022, p. 18). These shocks can be categorized as either man-made or natural critical events (Nielsen et al., 2023). While political violence, civil unrest, and wars may show precursors in the form of tensions or instability, natural disasters are generally less foreseeable (Owens, 2021). Existing research has primarily focused on the responses of MNCs operating in regions affected by natural disasters, civil unrest, coups, terrorism, or armed conflicts (Nielsen et al., 2023). These events often intensify environmental risks (Meschi, 2022), compelling firms to make significant operational or strategic adjustments, such as divesting, exiting markets, or deepening engagement (Nielsen et al., 2023).

This study focuses specifically on violent conflict, defined as "the organized and sustained use of physical force that results in injury or death to persons and/or damage or destruction to property" (Oetzel & Getz, 2012, p. 168). Previous research suggests that MNCs often consider disinvestment after violent events, but responses vary by sector, home-country pressures, and crisis experience (Jimenez & Lupton, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2023). Resource-based investments may persist despite violence, while strong host-country governance reduces risks (Oh & Oetzel, 2011; Witte et al., 2017). Firms with localized conflict experience are more resilient, and co-located clusters enhance adaptability by fostering knowledge sharing and support during crises (Oh & Oetzel, 2017; Pallás-Rocafull et al., 2024).

While previous studies have largely focused on the responses of large MNCs in foreign markets affected by man-made or natural disasters, little attention has been given to the resilience strategies of exporting SMEs facing violent events within their home country. This study addresses this gap by examining resilience and survival strategies specifically designed for SMEs, emphasizing the critical role of cross-border partnerships during crises (Obadia et al., 2017; Ozanne et al., 2022). These international relationships require unique resilience strategies compared to those used in domestic situations. Exporters face pressures not only from local disruptions but also from the expectations and needs of foreign partners, who may provide essential support, such as financial aid or logistical assistance, but also bring specific demands or limitations during crises.

Resilience is understood here as both an ability and a process, encompassing anticipation, coping, and adaptation in response to unforeseen circumstances (Duchek, 2020; Su & June, 2023). It involves recovering from critical events while maintaining business activities (Duchek, 2020; Hillmann & Guenther, 2021), with sensemaking and awareness as essential mechanisms (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021).

Recognizing early crisis signals and building awareness are central to anticipation (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021; Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016), enabling proactive preparation. Firms with developed anticipatory practices can better respond to crises by processing information quickly and developing actionable solutions (Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016; Su & June, 2023). Coping entails acknowledging the crisis and creating solutions (Duchek, 2020), with sensemaking critical for analyzing and interpreting the situation to overcome denial (Duchek, 2020; Su & June, 2023). These processes are sometimes described as shock absorption, the ability to "maintain stability and preserve assets" during disruptions

(Conz & Magnani, 2020, p. 404). During this phase, bricolage and coordination are often used, involving creative resource reconfiguration and organized responses (Duchek, 2020).

Adaptation, the final stage of resilience, involves learning from the crisis and transforming the organization in response (Duchek, 2020; Su & June, 2023). Organizations must reflect on past experiences and incorporate these insights into their knowledge base (Duchek, 2020; Hillmann & Guenther, 2021). Crises often push organizations to redefine business boundaries, making strategic renewal a fitting response to environmental adversity (Wenzel et al., 2021). Organizations that emerge from crises are often characterized by new practices, norms, and strategic approaches (Duchek, 2020).

Political violence, such as an inter-state war, also comprises different stages: pre-armed conflict phase, armed violence phase, and post-conflict phase (Owens, 2021). The first stage is characterized by tensions and political, economic, and/or social instability; the armed violence occurs during the second stage and leads to human losses, property, and infrastructure destruction. The post-conflict phase marks the end of violence and is often considered as an "opportunity for cooperation and peace" (Owens, 2021, p. 33). In this research, because the war is still ongoing, we focus on two stages of an armed conflict and explore how Ukrainian exporting SMEs were able to anticipate and cope with violence.

2.2 | Antecedents of exporters' resilience: Relational factors

The academic literature identifies a range of antecedents to resilience across individual, group, organizational, and network levels (Su & June, 2023). At the individual level, the resilience of top management drives the organization to move forward (Santoro et al., 2020). Personal traits such as improvisation or bricolage enhance organizations' ability to confront adversity and crises (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). At the team level, similar to individual improvisation, teams' capacity to improvise supports adaptation, while the diverse knowledge and experience of team members foster innovative solutions (Duchek, 2020; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011).

At the organizational level, resilience is strengthened through various resources and capabilities. For instance, slack resources, whether financial or physical, provide essential support (Iftikar et al., 2021) while learning capabilities and flexibility foster employees' adoption of novel problem-solving approaches (Battisti et al., 2019; Do et al., 2022; Iftikar et al., 2021). From a strategic perspective, a balance of strategic consistency and ambidexterity has also been found to improve organizational resilience (Iborra et al., 2020). Finally, at the network level, integration emerges as an important factor in fostering firms resilience, enabling the flow of tangible and intangible resources (Iftikar et al., 2021). Our research focuses on antecedents at the network level, particularly vertical integration through relational aspects, an area that has received comparatively less attention in earlier studies (Zafari et al., 2020). To address this gap, we adopt a relational perspective in our analysis.

For exporting SMEs, relationships with foreign clients and importers are essential, representing the backbone of their international operations (Obadia et al., 2017). Those relationships are the stepping stone for joint new product development (Kantaruk Pierre et al., 2024), as well as the support of communication, promotion, and distribution (Obadia & Vida, 2024). It thus appears clearly that those dynamics associated with the relationships between exporters and importers are critical in enhancing SMEs' export performance (Aykol & Leonidou, 2018; Leonidou et al., 2014). Building upon this assumption, we propose that those relationships could also play a substantial role in enhancing exporters' resilience in hostile situations, such as wartime.

Our research adopts a relational perspective, where relational capital is seen as social assets, built upon established partnerships and relationships (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Key relational aspects of the buyer-supplier relationships include trust, commitment, and cooperation (Blonska et al., 2013; Kantaruk Pierre et al., 2024; Palmatier, 2008). Trust, based on reliability and integrity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), is oftentimes seen as the foundation of strong and reliable relationships. Commitment echoes a shared intent of both parties to maintain long-term partnerships (Moorman et al., 1992). Cooperation relies on collaborative efforts, shared goals, and joint problem-solving (Leonidou et al., 2014; Obadia et al., 2017). Altogether, these relational aspects reinforce exporters' capacity to survive disruptions through mutual support and coordinated efforts to exogenous shocks.

Relational factors are particularly beneficial for strategic decision-making in challenging environments, with strong partnerships enabling firms to better confront political risks (Darendeli & Hill, 2016). For example, firms with solid foreign market relationships are less likely to exit markets under instability and can often re-enter smoothly once conditions stabilize (Yala et al., 2018).

Some studies question the overall positive role played by social capital (and its relational dimensions such as trust, commitment, and cooperation), suggesting it may hinder creativity and problem solving during crises (Pillai et al., 2017). However, during turbulent times, access to resources through established networks often fosters resilience. For instance, supply chain integration based on trust and coordination enhances continuity and adaptability (Iftikar et al., 2021). Nevertheless, network embeddedness may introduce challenges, as interdependencies among partners can complicate crisis management (Su & June, 2023). Overall, findings on international operations are inconclusive: while strong relational ties and governance mechanisms have proven valuable for resilience in some cases (e.g., French-Tunisian joint ventures during the Arab Spring) (Bahri Korbi et al., 2021), SMEs might also focus on maintaining critical partnerships and abandon less essential ones during crises (Fath et al., 2021).

This study seeks to further examine and clarify the role of relational factors in enhancing exporters' resilience during wartime, aiming to deepen our understanding of how relationships impact resilience amid the severe disruptions caused by violent conflicts.

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Research design and data collection

Due to the relatively rare nature of the phenomenon (Beamish & Hasse, 2022), we adopted a qualitative case study approach. Our methodological approach integrates theory and context, aiming to generate "contextualized explanations" (Welch et al., 2020). Using an abductive strategy that combines deductive and inductive elements, we draw on established theories to guide our initial analysis, while remaining open to new patterns emerging from the data, allowing us to adapt theoretical insights to our specific context.

Our deductive component relies on established frameworks for stages of violent conflict and resilience mechanisms, providing a structured foundation to examine resilience stages (anticipation, coping, and adaptation) within conflict phases (pre-conflict, active conflict, and post-conflict). This theoretical base offers a starting point for identifying expected patterns and relationships in the data.

Simultaneously, we incorporate an inductive element, allowing insights to emerge from empirical data that may not align with existing theories. This process enables us to refine our theoretical understanding based on the evidence, enriching our perspective on resilience mechanisms within the unique conditions of a violent conflict.

We used the following criteria to select companies for our study: (a) Ukrainian exporting firms operating in different industries, (b) geographical diversity, and (c) independent companies not affiliated with any international group. Including firms from various industries allows us to control sector-specific differences in resilience. Different industries face unique risks, supply chain challenges, and levels of dependence on international markets, all of which can shape how they respond to disruptions. Geographical diversity enables us to consider regional differences, such as proximity to conflict zones, access to resources, and local economic conditions. Lastly, we focused on independent firms to understand resilience strategies developed without the external support of a larger international group.

Despite facing highly adverse conditions, the participants were forthcoming in sharing their insights and perspectives on managing export operations during the conflict.

Furthermore, several respondents recommended that contacts be used to conduct interviews with other exporters. We conducted two rounds of interviews. During the first round, a total of 19 interviews were carried out from February to March 2023, marking 1 year since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion. The interviews ceased upon reaching the point of data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). During the second round in September 2024, we re-interviewed the managers who agreed to participate. This design allows us to make a cross-case comparison (by interviewing companies from different industries and regions of Ukraine, more or less affected by the war) and analytical generalization (Leonard-Barton, 1990).

We targeted export managers and CEOs of Ukrainian exporting firms as respondents since we consider them knowledgeable agents (Gioa, 2021; Magnani & Gioia, 2023). They have the best knowledge of all processes and practices mobilized to deal with the environment's adversity. In addition, to triangulate the data, we used supplementary sources of information: firms' websites and social and traditional media. Data triangulation allowed us to strengthen our results and the reliability of the study (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010).

During the first round, the interviews lasted 45–85 min, and the follow-up interviews lasted between 20 and 45 min. All the interviews were conducted by Ukrainian-speaking researchers who were deeply familiar with the war context. They were transcribed, and notes were also taken. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the interviewed firms.

We developed an interview guide based on the literature review (Dumez, 2003). The interviews centered on how these exporters confronted the challenges of the war and the influence of their pre- and post-invasion relationships with foreign partners on their resilience. We framed open-ended questions such as: "How did you modify your strategies to maintain and grow your company's international activities during the war?" and "Do you plan to continue any long-term alterations in your approach to overseas operations after the war?" We also asked, "In what manner have your relationships with foreign customers or distributors assisted you during the war?" and "How have these relationships changed during the conflict?" among others. These questions aimed to gather clear insights into the dynamics of their IB relationships during wartime challenges. The follow-up interviews focused on the current state of business and international activities as well as on difficulties encountered over 2 years of war, their state of mind, and their vision of the future.

TABLE 1 Ukrainian exporting firms' characteristics.

Respondent	Function	Region	Industry	Size	Number of countries	Export sales (%)
R1	CEO	Lviv, West	Wood	60	10	80
R2	COO	Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk, Khmelnytskyi (West, Center)	IT	150	20	100
R3[a]	CEO	Horodenka, West	Pottery	50	1	25–30
R4	Export manager	Kyiv, Cherkassy (Center)[b]	Textile	100	7	42
R5	CEO	Kyiv, Center	Textile	11	15	10
R6	General manager	Lutsk, West	Food	1200	7	80
R7	CEO	Odessa, South	Gift	5	10	10
R8	CEO	Hostomel, Kyiv region, Center[c]	Decoration	5	7	50
R9[a]	Export manager	Chernivtsi, West	Decoration	100	10	60
R10	CEO	Kyiv, Center	Food	1000	10	20
R11	CEO	Kyiv, Center	Media services	6	9	50
R12	Export manager	Lviv, West	Food	7	5	60
R13	CEO	Kyiv, Center	Food	4	1	0[d]
R14[a]	CEO	Lviv, West	Cosmetics	7	2	50
R15	CEO, co-founder	Kharkiv, East	Industrial equipment	17	3	95
R16[a]	CEO, co-founder	Hust, West	Wood	100	2	100
R17[a]	CEO, co-founder	Ivano-Frankivsk, West	Wood decoration	40	3	20
R18[a]	CEO	Borodianka, Kyiv region, Center[c]	Wood decoration	200	97	50
R19[a]	CEO	Kyiv, Center[b]	Appliances	45	10	85

[a]Follow-up interviews in September 2024.
[b]Relocated to the western part of Ukraine.
[c]Occupied city, liberated in April 2022, high-intensity battles, relocated to the western part of Ukraine.
[d]Stopped exporting after a few months following the invasion.

3.2 | Data analysis

During the data analysis process, we coded the data using Nvivo software. A coding unit was defined as "an idea or a set of ideas that can be isolated from the rest of the qualitative data and presents a certain coherence" (Point & Fourboul, 2006, p. 64). We followed the recommendations proposed by Gioa et al. (2012) to build the data structure. First, while developing first-order codes, we tried to stay close to "informant terms" (Magnani & Gioia, 2023, p. 3). Second, we developed second-order codes by "sorting, reducing, and aggregating first-order codes using increasingly abstract categories" (Magnani & Gioia, 2023, p.3). If any difference in coding emerged, it was discussed until a consensus was reached. These concepts represented the theoretical dimensions that helped simplify the information in the codes. The second-order concepts that emerged were: (a) building awareness of upcoming crises, (b) planning/lack of planning, (c) communication, (d) mutual commitment, (e) cooperation, (f) organizational adaptation, and (g) relational strategy. Finally, we aggregated these categories into three broad categories: (a) anticipation, (b) coping, and (c) pre-adaptation. This procedure allowed us to synthesize the empirical findings from our data and theoretical concepts in the literature (Gioa, 2021). Figure 1 summarizes our data analysis process and represents the structure of our discussion.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Pre-armed conflict phase: Anticipation

We started our interviews by asking our respondents to recall their state of mind, thoughts, and discussions weeks before the full-scale invasion. At that time, Ukrainian and European media reported warnings from American and British intelligence about the imminence of the attack, and all of our respondents were aware of what was happening. However, they "*still couldn't believe that war may begin*" (R4) or "*did not want to believe*" (R13, R16, R18). Some of them were "*skeptical that in the 21st century there could be such an aggressive war*" (R6) or "*optimistic*" (R2). One manager admits that he "*did not even take a look on the map; the location of the* [Russian] *troops was near district Ivankivskyi* [very close to the production facilities of the company]" (R18). Note that there is no variation in responses concerning the industry or company size, and considering these first reactions, the event appears unexpected for most of the companies we interviewed.

Still, some managers discussed these signals from the environment with their colleagues and employees within the firm. With this regard, the worst-case scenario envisioned was "*it would start slowly*" (R19) in the "*East of Ukraine*" (R10, R18). Within two firms, management teams were split: believers and non-believers. Respondent 2 recalls:

"*Every day my partner told me 'there will be a war, we should do something, and when I devised a plan, it would break into elementary logic [...] One idea was to relocate our people, but how many would move? Students? Those who don't have families?*". Nearly the same discussions were reported by respondent 19, who "*was ready to take financial risks for strategic safety*" but "*did not succeed in convincing*" his partners and firms' employees. Few informants "*took it seriously*" (R4), and even so it was "*challenging to predict how everything will turn out and whether it will be possible to work...will the banking system collapse?*" (R7). Thus, for managers to acknowledge the risk, it was a challenging task to prepare because the management teams did not agree or know precisely what they should be prepared for.

Concerning clients' awareness, respondents report two opposite reactions: worry or business as usual. Some foreign clients and partners, mainly American and European ones, "*paid attention, [...] at that time Americans alerted seriously*" (R1). They were open about their concern and warned their Ukrainian suppliers: "*They were worried about uninterrupted provision of services*" (R2). Some clients preferred to delay orders. Respondent 13 recalls that "*we finalized the order, and* [the client said] *let's just postpone its execution to March. So we postponed to March, and well... it was not executed*". Other foreign clients were less open and "*admitted later that they*

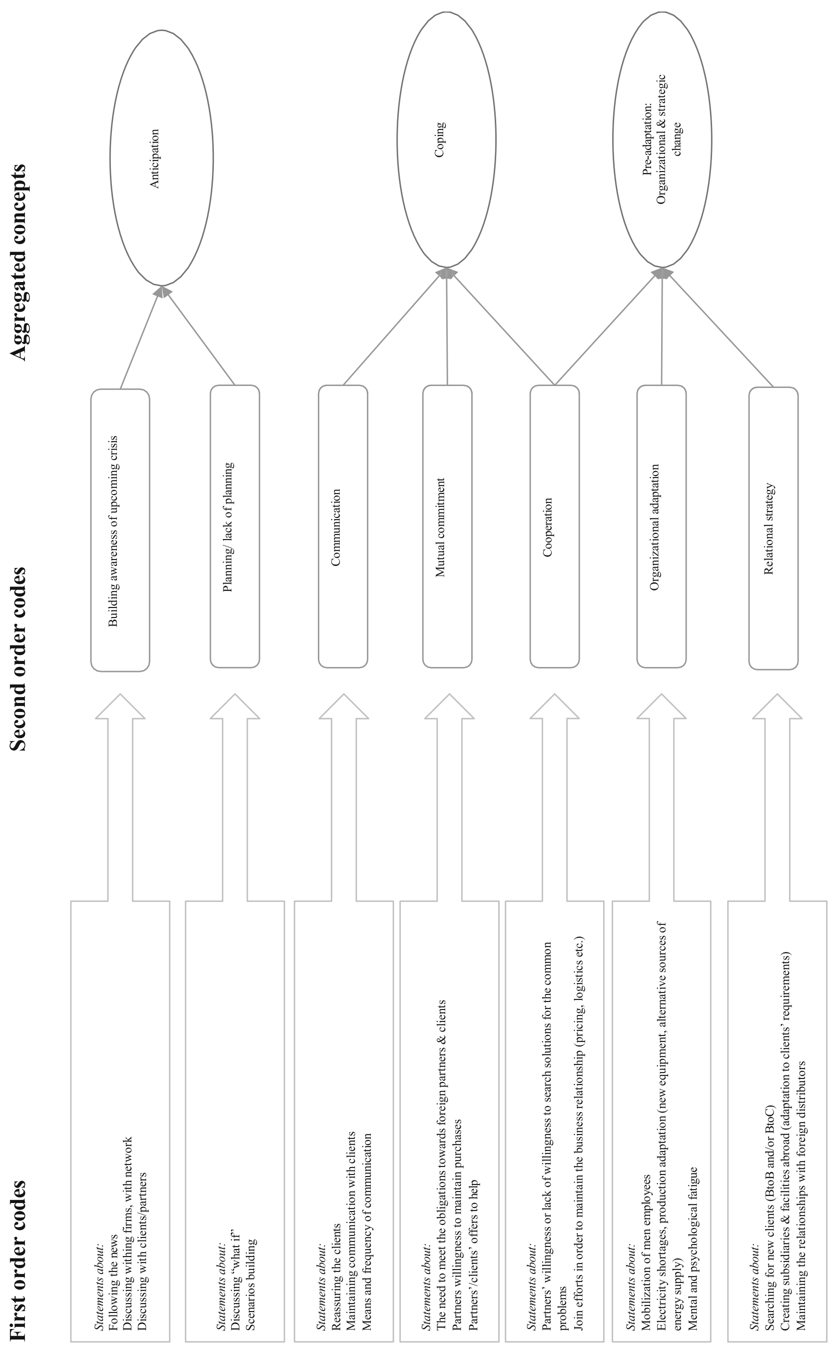

FIGURE 1 Data structure.

had delayed orders" (R1). "Business as usual" attitude related to the absence of "*warning messages from our clients*" (R9), to "*normal working process*" (R10), and to "*everything was the same*" (R4) despite the news background. Ukrainian managers did not take the lead to "*even talk with our partners about a possible invasion*" (R4). This is not surprising when considering Ukrainian managers' reaction to all signals from the environment.

In light of these attitudes and answers, there was almost no planning. The interviewed managers were mostly "*not ready*" (ex.: R3, R8, R9). A few of them "*discussed some scenarios*" (R10) and had little financial reserves so that if something did "*happen, we would have enough for two months*" (R13). Others consider "*a plan will not help; you can plan when you are already in that situation*" (R5).

Recall that the anticipation stage comprises building awareness and preparing for critical events (Duchek, 2020). Our respondents could recognize signals from their environment through the media, their network, and their clients' more or less open warnings.

All managers were also able to interpret this information, and from their attitudes and responses, we could conclude that they underestimated the risk. They mainly were "non-believers." As to "believers," either they were unable to rally teams within their firms to develop contingency plans and take preventive actions, or they did not know under what circumstances they should be prepared.

Concerning relational aspects, "business as usual" appears to be a daily routine during the weeks preceding the invasion. Only a few importers insisted on postponing orders, while others continued planning for future purchases. This mutual avoidance of a complex issue, a regular communication without focusing on alerting messages, maintained some denial. So, the crisis planning did not happen within the interviewed firms. One of our informants concluded: "*What is important is what you do after, during the first days and weeks*" (R2). Table 2 illustrates the main findings in the anticipation stage.

4.2 | Armed-violence stage: Coping

Coping comprises accepting and developing solutions (Duchek, 2020). The acceptance or shock absorption stage was different from one company to another. Few companies needed only

TABLE 2 Summary of the results related to the pre-armed conflict stage.

Anticipation	Key results

Building awareness	• Following the news
	• Discussions within the firms
	  ○ Management teams
	  ○ Employees
	• Discussions with clients
	  ○ Open warnings
	  ○ Delayed orders
	  ○ Business as usual
	• Believers versus non-believers

Preparing	• Scenarios discussion • Lack of planning • Unpreparedness

"*three days*" (R16) or "*two weeks*" (R19), while others needed between 3 and 4 months (e.g., R5, R13, R18) to decide whether and how to continue their business activity. This time was used in different ways. Respondents 4, 8, 18, and 19 chose to relocate their business to other regions of Ukraine. In the case of respondent 18, the company needed to start over because "*when Kyïv region was no longer under occupation, we understood that our production facility was destroyed*." The CEO explained all the steps in a couple of interviews for Ukrainian business media outlets (e.g., delo.ua). The same situation is described by respondent 8; their "*workshop was completely looted*." Note that the interviewed SMEs could resume their activity, at least partly, during the first months following the full-scale invasion. For example, R3's Facebook post on March 22nd, 2022, stated that "*the most important thing that we can do now is go back to work. We decide to work*."

Concerning foreign clients, communication appears to be the first and most critical task. It was "*important not to disappear*" (R2). The communication is "*constant*" (R10), and during the first weeks, it took place "*daily*" (R6, R8, R14). In addition to frequency and regularity, reassuring clients was another important goal. R2 explains with genuine humor: "*They* [employees] *probably cursed me for that*," but "*in the chat, I wrote, guys, if you are driving your families to Romania, to Moldova, if you're hiding in your basements, it's OK, your safety first, […] but please, for the sake of having a future, take 15 minutes to tell your clients that we stay in touch, and we'll handle the situation*." Explaining to the clients "*what was going on*" (R10) was necessary, so "*they could feel us, our mood, […] give them the confidence that we are doing fine*" (R19). The majority of interviewed managers agreed that communication had to be "*transparent and honest*" (R11) because this is the most "*effective way to communicate*" (R10). They also needed to understand whether the clients would continue to work with them. Few companies contacted all their clients and foreign distributors to know "*who leaves, who stays, who supports… their risks, their pains, their hopes*, etc." (R19). Thus, the managers' main focus was informing the clients about the firm's plans from day one, describing the changing situation to comfort them, and eventually keeping them.

Independently of geographical location or industry, the interviewed CEOs and managers were determined to save their business. R19's Instagram post, written in English on February 24, 2022, reflects this dedication: "*Ukrainian business is holding on, continuing to work, creating value, and knows how to recover and develop quickly on critical conditions*." They were also determined to continue exporting activities despite obvious difficulties with logistics and borders partly closed. R4 explained: "*After we managed our customs issues and permissions, we continued to deliver nearly the same amounts and with the same frequency*." The expression "*obligations*" or "*respect our obligations*" was used by most of our informants. The managers stressed the importance of "*doing our job, to produce*" (R3) for the clients, "*to comply with agreements*" (R6, R12), and "*to prove that we can deliver, take our responsibilities*" (R2). R19 "*understood that it was critical to do everything to ensure that the importers could work comfortably and with minimized risks*." This exporters' commitment was also translated into more cooperative efforts. First, some firms agreed with their partners to adjust pricing policies. Few companies kept the same prices during the year or "*went down on prices*" (R4). Other firms had to go through negotiations. R19 recalls: "*We lowered the retainer payment to 70%*". They sometimes had to "*renegotiate all conditions*" (R1). Second, delivery issues had to be resolved. Managers found new ways of delivering through "*fulfillment intermediaries*" (R18), "*grouping orders*" (R17), or "*postponed deliveries*" (R8). Thus, the interviewed exporters were fully committed to performing their obligations, making adjustments, and finding new arrangements.

While asked about what helped them stay determined and overcome the difficulties beyond the "*need to move forward*" (R16), our respondents stressed the role played by their foreign clients and partners. The exporting activity itself was a lifeline, considering the economic downturn in the Ukrainian market. Few companies were "*pushed to develop their exporting activities by the war*" (R17). R15 acknowledged: "*Our partners' orders and their support were the most important factors*." Some clients were even "*ready to order more*" (R16). The terms "*help*," "*support*," and "*continue to order*" were used by the majority of our respondents. Thus, the simple fact of continuing to order was "*a huge support*" (R4). Note that cooperative efforts also accompanied commitment from foreign clients and importers. First, they agreed to "*postpone contracts*" (R15), to "*pay retainers*" (R10), "*not to return the money they paid in advance*" (R4). Second, some clients and partners were willing to adjust to new challenges concerning production and shortened product lines "*because of curfews, reduced number of employees*" (R10). They also agreed to find new ways/solutions to deal with marketing mix-related issues. R8 explained: "*Our Dutch distributor took over the communication with other Ukrainian partners on the project, the final product completion, and the logistics on their market*." Finally, few foreign distributors played a critical role in helping their Ukrainian partners. For instance, respondent 18 admitted that the decision to relocate and reopen new production facilities was easy "*because we had our clients and partners [...] our Japanese distributor proposed us to pay 300000-400000 US dollars an advance so we can rebuild and restart*." R3 used a powerful metaphor when describing his Swiss partner: "*He is not a simple partner, I call him our messiah [...] Now, he wants to invest 200000 euros in a new independent energy supply for us, solar panels with a big capacity, install hydro turbines*."

This display of partners' commitment and cooperative efforts on both sides can be explained by two factors stressed by our informants: past relationship quality and trust. R18 described his approach: "*We always tried to build a good relationship; we are a very ecological company in this regard*." In some cases, managers talked about values and "*building business on moral factors*" (R3). Also, according to our respondents, personal relationships matter. R16 considers everything "*relies only on personal relationships*" with foreign buyers and clients. For most of our respondents' trust is a core value (ex.: R11, 18, 19, 16). Some respondents report that in the past, they were in situations when mutual trust was tested, and today, they can "*work more smoothly*" (R1). In other cases, mistrust was the reason to stop business relationships, as explained by R19: "*This is all about values. We started working with Chinese distributors, and at the very beginning, the problem of communication was well the lack of trust, [...] anyway no one trusted anyone*." Finally, during the full-scale invasion, clients and partners "*did the most important thing: they trusted us*" (R11), and this attitude of "*believing in us, trusting us*" (R18) was also a sign of support.

Note that there is also a "dark side." The interviewed companies did lose clients and distributors, entered more transactional approaches, and met more competitive attitudes. R4 and R19 were open about these negative dynamics. For the distributors, "*this is always a balance between risks and opportunities*" (R19). R4 admitted that "*some clients suspended business activity with us not to risk their supply chain*." The challenge becomes more visible within big corporate clients from the IT service industry who now, for security reasons, "*have terms in their internal policies: not to buy services from Ukrainian companies*" (R2).

Thus, immediate, transparent, and regular communication with foreign clients and distributors was critical from day one as the first coping mechanism. The communication helped to deal with uncertainty and to understand which clients were still planning on working with their Ukrainian suppliers. From the relational capital perspective, communication is an essential determinant of exporter-importer relational quality (Leonidou et al., 2014). It fosters trust, cooperation, and commitment (Leonidou et al., 2014; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Next, Ukrainian exporters were firmly committed to respecting their contractual agreements and obligations to maintain the relationship. They found new ways to deliver products, changed pricing policies, and proved to their remaining clients that they could produce under hostile circumstances. From the relational perspective, commitment to maintaining a relationship positively and directly affects financial performance (Leonidou et al., 2014). Thus, we believe that this willingness to comply with obligations through finding new solutions enhances resilience since these efforts could be qualified as bricolage mechanisms, short-term creative answers to immediate problems (Duchek, 2020).

Cooperative efforts were made on both sides. Most importers and clients also showed committed attitudes and accepted this very challenging situation by agreeing to necessary changes in deliveries and production. They offered help and support, and few were ready to invest more to help their suppliers. These efforts made by the importers illustrate the mutuality of cooperation and commitment in an exchange, and mutuality is a critical determinant of relational performance (Ahmed et al., 2021). From this perspective, mutual commitment and cooperation strengthen the exporter's resilience. Table 3 describes the main findings at this stage.

4.3 | Armed-violence stage: Pre-adaptation

The war is ongoing, and we cannot discuss the full adaptation and recovery from the crisis. Nevertheless, we can report on a few aspects related to changes likely to be sustained over time and to strategic choices already made. We call this stage pre-adaptation.

First, organizational changes encompass dealing with access to skilled human resources (R1, R5, R9). On the one hand, "*people are spread all over the country*" (R3, R15), and it "*creates more expenses*" (R15); on the other, some companies didn't manage to move all their employees when the company decided to relocate, as explained by R18: "*We moved 80 employees out of*

TABLE 3 Summary of the results related to violent stage: Coping.

Coping	Key results

Communication	• Immediate communication
	  ○ Reassure the clients/partners
	  ○ Understand the future of a business relationship
	• Regular communication
	  ○ Transparent and open communication about a quickly changing situation

Mutual commitment	• On the exporters' side
	  ○ The willingness to respect their obligations
	• On the importers' side
	  ○ The willingness to help and support their suppliers

Cooperation	• On the exporters' side
	  ○ Make efforts in pricing to counterpart the logistics uncertainties
	  ○ Find new solutions to deliver products
	• On the importers' side
	  ○ Accept changes and search for solutions regarding production and deliveries
	  ○ Investments as a solution to fabric bombing

200, other employees couldn't relocate." Moreover, the interviewed companies had to adapt to mobilization rules from the very beginning of the full-scale invasion. R16 recalls, "*All our men employees were mobilized during the first week [...] we had to start over*." After the new mobilization law passed in May 2024, all the companies were affected by this challenge. Where possible, firms replace "*men's labor with women's labor*" (R14, R17, 2024) or "*invest in training of the remaining employees, in automatization*" (R9, 2024). In other cases, companies "*engage fathers of large families, men caring for a person with a disability*" (R16, 2024). Occasionally, managers "*need to negotiate*" (R3, R16) with local military commissioners to delay their employees' mobilization, and "*sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't*" (R3, 2024). Few companies are recognized as critical for the regional economy, and they can "*reserve up to 50% of men employees, and they continue to work*" (R16, R19, 2024). Because of these challenges, some companies "*can't envisage growth, we don't have enough people*" (R13), and others experience delays, as explained by R14 (2024): "*often our [Ukrainian] suppliers can't respect deadlines, they lack employees*."

In addition to mobilization and displacement, companies had to adapt their practices to electricity shortages. Firms adapted their production schedule (R17) or invested in alternative sources of energy (R2, R9). Few companies had help from their foreign partners. R3 (2024) confirmed that his Swiss distributor had delivered on his promise and "*had bought a generator and a solar panel [...] the firm wouldn't be able to invest so much*." Few companies continued to invest in new equipment (R16, R17, R19). These investments allowed to "*increase production capacity*" (R17, 2024), to become "*independent from the suppliers, [...]to have a closed production circle, to be more efficient*," but managers are constantly struggling with finding financial solutions for energy supply (R19, 2024). The majority of our respondents employed the terms "*flexibility*" (R13, R19) and "*adaptation*" (R15) to describe their routines. Some respondents find positive "*side-effects*": "*We understood how efficient we can be only when we had electricity and Internet for four hours daily*" (R13). R5 explains: "*You understand what you should focus on if you are flexible and responsive, you analyze different situations, it is positive for your business*."

Psychological and mental fatigue due to the duration of the war is another difficult issue. "*Tired*," "*exhausted*" (R17, R3, R19, 2024), and "*burnt out*" (R19, 2024) are the adjectives used by our respondents to describe the psychological state of their employees, and sometimes their own. R16 (2024) explains: "*It's difficult to motivate the employees. They come to work, do their jobs, but they are just numb, indifferent*." R19 recognizes, as do some other respondents (R14, R17, 2024), his difficulties: "*It is hard. During first year or two we were enthusiastic [...], now it is difficult, I tried wine, next I tried sports, well now I am on antidepressants*." Managers consider themselves "*understanding and supportive*" (R14; 2024). Some of them offer psychological help: "*We try to maintain a positive environment within the firm, we organize psychological support and flexible conditions of work*" (R9, 2024).

Concerning strategic change, we observed that cooperative practices were not only coping mechanisms but also lasted over time. Respondents adopted different marketing-related processes to serve their foreign distributors and clients better. Changes in "*solving clients demand [...] in delivering services*" are mentioned by R15. R19 company invested in services "*more than before*" and hired a new employee with a particular set of skills, "*an English- speaking guy who helps our importers, receives their demands, helps with different services*." For security purposes, in IT services, the R2 firm "*hires people who left the country; it's better for our clients*."

To lower the risks for their clients and importers and to facilitate logistics, some companies decided to open commercial branches abroad. R13 explained: "*If you have branches in Europe,* *for instance, in Poland, you have some stock there as well; you have more opportunities*." This approach helps to reassure clients, as stated by R17: "*We opened two commercial branches, one in Poland and one in France [...] for some clients our location in Ukraine is enough, but for others, well, we overcome their concern through our European branches*." Maintaining own stocks abroad can be financially demanding. Fulfillment companies appear as a suitable solution, as discussed with R18 who "*found couple fulfillment suppliers abroad with a simple search online*" and started working with them to deliver products. Big companies, having more financial and other resources, were able to build logistic hubs abroad. R6 described his company's collaboration with Polish partners and local government: "*A Gdansk, they gave us some land to build our hub, from this hub we can charge ships with our products* [since the company lost access to Ukrainian southern ports]."

Deepening business relationships with existing clients is another way to move forward. Signing new contracts or creating joint ventures is also a more engaging change. Among our informants, two companies saw their current business activity evolve in those directions. R2 and R15 discuss new opportunities with their partners. While R2 received a proposal to "*develop a joint company*" on the UAE market, R15 signed a new contract "*for joint equipment production*" with their Israeli clients who "*are ready to help in building producing facilities in Israel*."

Beyond finding new ways to continue their business relationships with existing clients and partners, Ukrainian exporters targeted new markets by searching for new clients in parallel. Presenting products during sales shows and exhibitions abroad is the primary approach. For example, R10 relates its participation in important international food industry events on its social media: "*We are happy to exchange with our current and new partners to ensure the further growth of our company*" (R10's Facebook post on May 22, 2023). Some companies try to find new clients if "*existing ones decide to stop working with us*" (R11).

Others stay consistent with their previous strategy. For instance, R16 (2024) company developed a new product and "*built a new production facility*," and their goal is "*to find importers in India and China for it since the company continues to target bigger markets*."

Finally, trying e-commerce tools and "*developing drop shipping*" (R9, 2024) are yet alternative ways to diversify clients. Being mostly oriented toward working with distributors abroad, R14 and R17 created their accounts on Etsy and Amazon. "*For now, we registered only one company on Amazon*," said the R17, referring to one of their European branches, "*but our focus remains on dealing with importers and B2B clients*."

During follow-up interviews in 2024, our respondents confirmed that their relationships with foreign distributors and clients didn't change (R3, R16). Foreign partners also adapted to this hostile context. Managers continue "*to work with foreign distributors*" (R3, R9) and "*sign new contracts*" (R19). R19 explains: "*They [importers] see that we deal with difficulties, we deliver on time, [...] they are less worried*." We note therefore that efforts put into developing international activities don't always lead to the desired results. For some companies "*it is very slow*" (R14, R17) and "*difficult to meet the manager in charge, to convince*" (R17). For other firms, the market "*slowed down dramatically*" (R16) in their industry. When asked about the future, the common response is "*I don't know*" (R14, R17, R19). Our respondents appear not to have long-term plans (R14 R17), since "*it is impossible*" (R16) and "*presumptuous*" (R19) to plan. Few managers "*don't want to think about when the war will be over*" (R3, R14, R19) since it only "*drains psychological resources*" (R3). They "*focus on today*" (R3), their "*work in given conditions*" (R19), on what they can do now. R3 confides: "*There's no purpose to think about that, I'm not a sorcerer from the Carpathian Mountains to predict the future, I have two options: either I work and help the army, or I enroll in the army*" (R3). Thus, the future appears more uncertain

TABLE 4 Summary of the results related to violent stage: Pre-adaptation.

Pre-adaptation	Key results
Organizational change	• New recruitment practices • Adaptation of production schedules • Investment in new equipment and alternative energy supply • Flexible and supportive working environment
Client orientation	• Adapting client services, deliveries, and logistics • Searching for new clients • Maintaining the relationship with existing clients
Strategic change (deepening cooperative practices)	• Opening commercial branches abroad • Joint ventures with clients

than ever; the only certainty our respondents have is that one day "*the war will eventually be over*" (R19, R14, R17).

To conclude, even if the war is still ongoing, the interviewed companies adopted practices and new approaches to their business activity that could last over time. Major organizational changes are driven by difficulties related to access to human resources, energy shortages, and psychological fatigue. Different recruitment practices, investment in equipment, automatization, and alternative energy sources, as well as flexible and supportive working environments, appear to be the most common adaptive practices that go beyond bricolage. Learning to be more efficient and flexible allowed the interviewed companies to do, if not more, the same with less. Cooperative efforts translated into finding solutions about services, distribution, and delivery, and more strategic decisions related to opening branches abroad share the same intentions: to serve the clients and importers better, to overcome their doubts and concerns, and to be a more reliable partner. From a relational capital perspective, more committed cooperative efforts, translated into strategic decisions that last in time, could be conducive to recovery. Based on these findings, we suggest that during the violent stage of a long-lasting political conflict, pre-adaptation processes occur, translated into organizational and strategic change. Table 4 presents the primary findings from the pre-adaptation stage.

5 | DISCUSSION

Our research builds upon and extends previous studies on resilience antecedents, focusing on relational capital and relational dynamics within exporter-importer relationships (e.g., Runfola et al., 2023; Zafari et al., 2020). Our research frames relational capital as a pre-existing asset that firms can leverage to build resilience across the stages of crisis management, including anticipation, coping, and pre-adaptation. By examining relational dynamics during times of war, our study highlights how various dimensions of relational capital specifically contribute to the resilience of exporters, who must confront both local challenges and cross-border relationships, adding a distinctive international component to their resilience strategies.

The anticipation stage for exporters involves both local and foreign signals, which they must interpret to balance local realities with foreign expectations (Duchek, 2020). Our findings indicate that while exporters processed information and environmental signals, actionable planning was often missing. This gap can be attributed to challenges at multiple levels: individual, institutional, and relational. At the individual level, effective crisis planning is influenced by the degree of perceived risk (Spillan & Hough, 2003), yet our findings suggest a high degree of indifference or overconfidence among managers, leading to missed opportunities for proactive planning. Overconfidence among CEOs and managers, characterized by optimism in their judgment (Anderson et al., 2012), may have contributed to misinterpreting signals and underestimating risks.

On an institutional level, cultural values like uncertainty avoidance and tolerance for ambiguity play a role in crisis preparedness (Crossland & Hambrick, 2011). Contrary to Hofstede (2001), who indicates a low tolerance for uncertainty in Ukrainian society, the managers we interviewed displayed minimal concern. Given Ukraine's turbulent history over the past three decades, which includes major economic crises, two revolutions, the annexation of Crimea, the initial Russian incursion in the East, and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that these experiences have influenced managers' perceptions and responses to critical situations. This history could have potentially increased their tolerance for uncertainty or reduced their resistance to environmental changes.

In terms of relational capital, exporters approached the anticipation stage with a "business as usual" mindset, reflecting a reliance on the stability of their established foreign relationships. However, this assumption was based on trust in partners' previous reliability, which may have led to complacency. Prior research on trust highlights this phenomenon, referring to it as "the shadow of the past". Trust is built through learning during prior collaborations, and uncertainty is generally expected to undermine both continuity and trust (Poppo et al., 2008). However, partners often mitigate risks by choosing to believe in their capacity to cope with uncertainty (Latusek & Vlaar, 2018; Nikolova et al., 2015), perpetuating the "business as usual" logic. The cross-border context complicates resilience, as exporters rely on foreign partners who are not directly exposed to the crisis but play a critical role in sustaining operations. Trust and strong relational capital are invaluable, yet they need to be balanced with adaptability and proactive crisis planning to manage the specific demands of international partnerships effectively.

Thus, our findings lead us to the following proposition:

> **Proposition 1.** *During the anticipation stage in a crisis context, "business as usual" practices among exporters, including (a) managerial overconfidence, (b) a high tolerance for uncertainty, and (c) reliance on established relational capital with international partners, may reduce proactive contingency planning efforts, which are essential for building resilience.*

Next, we explore coping mechanisms and the pivotal role of relational capital in this context. Coping in the international context involves accepting challenges and developing solutions collaboratively with foreign partners (Duchek, 2020). Our findings suggest that Ukrainian exporters primarily relied on clear and reassuring communication with international clients and partners. This communication served as a means to bridge the gap between local disruptions and the stability expectations of foreign partners, ensuring that exporters could maintain trust and cooperation despite the distance and lack of direct exposure to the crisis.

Consistent with relational theories, this approach reinforces the idea that transparency in communication is essential to international resilience, as it enables cross-border stakeholders to understand and adapt to evolving circumstances (Leonidou et al., 2014; Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Knowing the expectations and plans of foreign clients is essential for prioritizing actions and establishing a basis for joint solutions. This process, rooted in cross-border transparency, becomes a stabilizing force during adversity, as exporters can estimate foreign partners' willingness to adjust to challenges.

Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 2. *During the coping stage in a crisis context, timely and transparent communication with foreign partners is essential for building resilience as it aligns expectations, and maintains essential trust and cooperation when partners may not experience the crisis directly.*

Duchek (2020) highlights the concept of "bricolage" as a coping mechanism involving creative improvisation. Bricolage in IB is not merely an improvised response but a cooperative, cross-border approach where exporters and importers find creative, short-term solutions that accommodate both parties.

Our findings suggest that short-term cooperative strategies with foreign partners, such as consolidating orders for delivery and offering discounts, embody this concept of bricolage.

These practices aim not only to fulfill foreign client expectations but also to adhere to contractual commitments. These cooperative efforts with international partners enhance relationship value and help exporters meet contractual obligations in challenging contexts (Abdul-Muhmin, 2002; Palmatier et al., 2007). Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 3. *During the coping stage in a crisis context, short-term cooperative strategies with foreign partners are essential for developing resilience ensuring adaptability and continuity across borders.*

In the cross-border context, mutual commitment extends beyond contractual adherence; it reflects a relational bond that is crucial for resilience. Exporters' ability to uphold obligations during crises significantly depends on foreign partners' willingness to honor agreements, despite the challenges posed by distance and local volatility. This commitment becomes a shared resource that enables both parties to overcome disruptions and manage uncertainty together (Leonidou et al., 2021). Based on these insights, we propose:

Proposition 4. *During the coping stage in a crisis context, mutual commitment between exporters and their international partners is fundamental for resilience, as this shared commitment ensures continuity and support, which are essential for facing the challenges of cross-border operations.*

Trust, established before the crisis, is a key element of relational capital that underpins resilience in international partnerships (Runfola et al., 2023). Trust cultivated in a cross- border context is not merely transactional; it forms the core of stability that allows both parties to maintain collaboration, even when direct communication or local conditions are disrupted. The cross-border nature of trust involves additional layers, as it often includes facing regulatory differences, economic fluctuations, and geopolitical concerns, which can only be effectively managed with a strong foundation of trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 5. *During the coping stage in a crisis context, trust established before the crisis with foreign partners is essential for resilience, as it sustains collaboration and* *commitment when partners are geographically distant and face differing exposure to the crisis.*

Finally, in prolonged political conflicts, especially during the violent phase, we observe that "pre-adaptation" mechanisms emerge. Unlike coping, which involves quick responses and improvised solutions, pre-adaptation involves lasting organizational and strategic changes that support full adaptation and eventual recovery. Despite the psychological fatigue and pressure, Ukrainian exporters are committed to investments that improve efficiency, address workforce shortages, and boost production capacity. These strategic decisions around foreign partnerships and international activities highlight their adaptability in times of crisis, aligning with previous studies on transformation (Su & June, 2023; Wenzel et al., 2021).

Long-term strategies like developing new delivery methods, expanding into diverse markets (B2B, B2C, drop shipping), setting up distribution hubs abroad, and hiring staff for international operations are examples of transformative changes that support resilience. These capabilities are essential for recovery, as they go beyond survival and actively sustain partnerships.

Moreover, strengthening relationships with current partners through actions like forming joint ventures or making substantial financial investments helps exporters adapt to new challenges and aids recovery. This commitment to cooperation aligns with the relational view of interfirm exchanges (Dwyer et al., 1987), underscoring the importance of collaboration and commitment for resilience and growth in business relationships. Thus, we propose:

Proposition 6. *During the pre-adaptation stage in a crisis context, implementing cooperative and long-term oriented solutions with foreign partners is essential for developing resilience and adaptability to manage crises.*

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Our study investigated the role of relational capital in fostering resilience among Ukrainian exporters during wartime, addressing an essential gap in IB research. This study is, to our knowledge, the first to focus specifically on resilience within the cross-border relationships of exporters in a crisis context, offering contributions at both theoretical and managerial levels.

At the theoretical level, we examined resilience as both a process and a capability, focusing on the stages of anticipation, coping, and pre-adaptation. While previous studies have mainly looked at coping mechanisms and recovery (Fath et al., 2021; Zafari et al., 2020), our findings highlight the importance of anticipation—building capabilities to prepare for the adversity of war. Importantly, we argue that resilience is not limited to immediate responses but extends into a pre-adaptation stage where short-term solutions evolve into long-term strategies through organizational and strategic change. For exporters, this stage represents a critical moment to reposition themselves strategically, underscoring resilience as a dynamic process.

Although research suggests that absorptive capacity helps foster resilience in inter-organizational contexts (Gölgeci & Kuivalainen, 2020; Yuan et al., 2022), our findings indicate that awareness and knowledge alone are not enough. Firms must also cultivate a genuine concern for potential crises to transform knowledge into actionable contingency plans. In this context, we highlight the dual role of relational capital: while previously built relational capital—such as trust and commitment—provides a foundation for resilience, it can also hinder anticipation by fostering a "business as usual" mindset. These results expand the discussion on relational resilience (Börekçi et al., 2021), defined as survival and continuity of relationships. While relational capital supports the continuity of relationships, it can also become a liability under certain conditions. This tension demonstrates the need for balance during the anticipation stage, as excessive reliance on past relational assets can lead to unpreparedness in the face of sudden disruptions.

Our focus on relational capital broadens the resilience literature by addressing the unique dependencies that SMEs face in international contexts (Bondeli & Havenvid, 2022). Our study reveals that transparent, proactive communication with foreign partners is essential for maintaining both trust and operational stability during crises. In an international setting, relational capital allows exporters to reassure foreign clients, sustain trust, and secure the necessary support. However, our findings suggest that while trust fosters continuity, it must be balanced with adaptive strategies to avoid overconfidence.

Our findings show that resilience strategies for exporters differ from those for domestic businesses due to the crucial role of cross-border relationships. Cooperation plays a critical role, acting as both a short-term coping mechanism and a long-term strategic tool. For instance, during coping stages, exporters renegotiate terms, co-develop solutions, and adjust logistics to address both local challenges and the expectations of foreign partners. Exporters rely on these partners' flexibility and commitment, underscoring how the international dimension directly shapes resilience strategies.

Over time, strategic transformation practices during "pre-adaptation" phase contribute to long-term recovery. Unlike short-term coping, these pre-adaptation practices—such as forming joint ventures, entering new markets, or restructuring supply chains—represent sustained resilience efforts. This shift shows how exporters use international relationships not only to survive but to reposition themselves strategically, illustrating that long-term resilience in IB contexts involves adapting to new market conditions and reinforcing foreign ties.

From a managerial perspective, our study offers valuable insights into practices that can enhance resilience for exporters in adverse situations. First, managers should strengthen anticipation capabilities by monitoring both local and international signals and incorporating scenario planning into their strategies to take a proactive stance in crisis preparation.

During crises, export managers should focus on clear and timely communication with foreign partners to reassure clients and maintain trust. Given that foreign partners may not directly experience the crisis, regular updates and open discussions help bridge this gap and foster cooperation. Managers should demonstrate their commitment to fulfilling agreements and understanding their partners' needs, which strengthen trust and relational quality.

To build resilience through pre-adaptation, managers should explore strategic opportunities in international markets. Actions such as setting up distribution hubs abroad, attending global trade events, and pursuing joint ventures can enhance resilience and deepen international relationships. As exporters face ongoing challenges, adopting a long-term, collaborative approach allows them to pivot strategically and access new resources, underscoring the role of relational capital in cross-border resilience.

Table 5 provides a framework for understanding the stages of crisis management and their implications for relational and resilience theories, along with practical managerial guidance for each stage.

TABLE 5 Resilience and relational dynamics in crisis management.

Stage of crisis management	Propositions	Contribution to resilience theory	Contribution to relational theory	Managerial advice
Anticipation	Proposition 1	Highlights the need for proactive risk assessment and contingency planning in building resilience	Emphasizes the complex role of relational capital in anticipating crises	• Integrate risk management with relational insights • Balance trust with proactive planning
Coping	Propositions 2–5	Underline the importance of effective coping strategies, such as communication and cooperation, in maintaining resilience during crises	Stress the critical role of communication and mutual commitment in maintaining solid relationships during crises	• Prioritize transparent communication • Adopt flexible strategies and honor commitments
Pre-adaptation	Proposition 6	Identify strategic transformation and learning as key to post-crisis recovery and resilience building	Highlight the significance of pre-crisis trust and long-term cooperative strategies in relationship evolution	• Build trust before crises • Focus on long-term strategies and partnerships for adaptation

6.1 | Limitations and further research avenues

This study has several limitations that also open avenues for future research. First, as our analysis captures resilience practices and experiences at a specific point in time, a longitudinal approach would provide deeper insights into how resilience strategies evolve and how the quality of relationships affects different stages of resilience building. Additionally, our study is focused on a single country with a distinct geopolitical context. Further research could broaden this perspective by examining resilience among exporters in varied geographical and cultural environments, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how these factors shape resilience strategies.

While our findings emphasize the positive role of relational factors in fostering resilience, future research could also investigate the less favorable aspects of relational dynamics during crises, including potential opportunistic behaviors or relational strain, as recent studies suggest (Obadia & Robson, 2021). For instance, in our study, some Ukrainian exporters faced renegotiations with foreign partners under terms that could be interpreted as opportunistic. Examining these dynamics would enhance our understanding of relational capital in challenging contexts.

Additionally, as this study focused on the exporters' perspective, future research should also consider the perspectives of both exporters and foreign clients. A dyadic approach would provide a more comprehensive view of how cross-border relational factors contribute to resilience, capturing the mutual dependencies and expectations that shape resilience strategies within IB contexts. Finally, extending the study to other partners within the network such as local clients and suppliers, as well as institutional partners, would allow a more complete understanding of network dynamics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (PI2020-118340RB-100) and Generalitat Valenciana (CIAICO-2022065).

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How to cite this article: Kantaruk Pierre, O., Mogos Descotes, R., & Pla-Barber, J. (2025). Resilience in times of war: How Ukrainian exporting SMEs enhance relational factors with foreign partners. *Global Strategy Journal*, *15*(2), 219–244. https://doi.org/10.1002/gsj.1523