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Building Civil Society in Wartime: Opportunities and Challenges on the Example of the Military Crisis in Ukraine in 2014–2023

Summary: The article examines the development of diverse forms of activism within Ukrainian society and how citizens have been mobilised in response to oppressive authorities and war. Although the war has triggered a profound humanitarian and political crisis, it has simultaneously fostered an unprecedented strengthening of resilience within civil society. The first two decades following the declaration of Independence cannot be regarded as pivotal for civil society-building; however, the situation changed markedly after the events of the Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity. The scale of the Revolution of Dignity, together with the subsequent military actions and the sense of agency gained by citizens who catalysed far-reaching political and social change, exerted a considerable influence on those involved. As a result, some participants formed organisations that continue to operate to this day.

Nevertheless, significant challenges persist in the functioning of Ukrainian civil society. These include the absence of long-term solutions to the ongoing humanitarian crisis, the discontinuity of reform processes, and the inability of the third sector to transform deeply entrenched corruption within state institutions. At present, many Ukrainian NGOs are undertaking functions that should properly fall within the remit of the state. This article therefore seeks to explore both the opportunities and the challenges facing civil society in Ukraine amid the ongoing war with Russia.

Keywords: Civil Society, Russo-Ukrainian war, Civil Society Organizations, Hubs of Engagement, humanitarian crisis

The term civil society is inherently complex and has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate, resulting in a multitude of interpretations and definitions. This complexity stems from its historical evolution and the varying contexts in which it is applied, ranging from democratic to authoritarian societies and from developed to developing nations. Civil society can encompass a broad spectrum of entities, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community groups, social movements, volunteer organisations, and other forms of collective citizen action.¹

In this article, we adopt the definition provided by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which conceptualises civil society as ‘a domain of social relations beyond the household, state, and business sectors, where people get together to satisfy and/or promote joint interests and to defend common values’.²

The issues related to civil society in Ukraine during the war, analysed from various perspectives, have been addressed by a wide range of scholars. It should be noted that their work focused on selected dimensions of civil society, such as grassroots social movements (studied by Orysia Lutsevych),³ youth activism (examined by Olena Nikolayenko),⁴ and volunteer movements (investigated by Kateryna Zarembo).⁵ This article represents an attempt to address the question of how civil society in Ukraine is developing during the war with Russia and what challenges arise from this process.

During the first two decades following Ukraine’s proclamation of independence in 1991, the development of a robust civil society was significantly hindered by a combination of historical, political, economic, and social factors, rendering this period less pivotal for civil society building.⁶ The legacy of Soviet rule had a significant impact in this regard, as the suppression of freedom of association and independent civic activity during that period led to an underdeveloped civil society infrastructure and a widespread mistrust of non-governmental organisations.⁷ The economic difficulties

1 A comprehensive review of definitions of civil society was carried out by: Zarembo K., Martin E. 2024, 206–209.

2 UNDP 2017.

3 Lutsevych O. 2013.

4 Nikolayenko O. 2019.

5 Zarembo K. 2017, 47–70.

6 There were legal provisions, including the Law on the Association of Citizens (1992), which enabled the development of non-governmental organizations. However, several specific regulations restricted their growth, such as the requirement for dual registration, limitations on conducting commercial activities, and the prohibition on forming joint associations and mixed corporations. See: Bilan Y., Bilan S. 2011, 78–86.

7 Researchers identify these elements as characteristic features of post-communist societies. Furthermore, they emphasise the absence of an organisational system typical of civil societies. See: Stepanenko V. 2006, 577; Howard M.M. 2002, 160–163. Howard is indicated that the reluctance in post-communist countries, including Ukraine, towards organisational activity stems from the prohibition on independent operation of organisations during the communist era. Furthermore, citizens in these states were often channelled into structures entirely controlled by the system. Equally significant were the established networks of personal relationships and the shared disappointment with the outcomes brought about by democratisation.

following the restoration of independence, including the deep crisis, hyperinflation, and unemployment, focused society's attention on securing basic needs, thereby limiting both the resources available for civic initiatives and citizens' capacity to participate in them. The low level of civic participation and trust, resulting from historical repression and persistent corruption, led to apathy and scepticism regarding the effectiveness of collective action in the process of social change. However, this situation underwent a radical transformation following the events of Euromaidan and the so-called Revolution of Dignity. The term 'Euromaidan' refers to the initial protests and social unrest that began in November 2013 — triggered by the Ukrainian government's decision to suspend the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union — reflecting the widespread desire of society for closer integration with Europe and opposition to corruption and authoritarianism. In contrast, the so-called Revolution of Dignity encompasses a broader movement that followed, including the escalation of demonstrations, clashes with security forces, and the eventual removal of President Viktor Yanukovich from power in February 2014.⁸ These events became the first instance of how society in Ukraine collectively responded to the challenges that it faced. This phenomenon — referred to as the 'Maidan energy' — symbolised the collective effort of hundreds of thousands of people working to address social issues and indicates that a sense of individual responsibility for the further democratic development of the state emerged within Ukrainian society.⁹ As Anton Oleinyk, points out:

These people contributed to their common goals financially, materially (e.g., bringing food, clothing, fuel, and other supplies), and through volunteer work [...]. The current massive civic action movement was born during the Maidan protests of 2013–14 and became even more robust and active after the start of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine in February of 2014.¹⁰

Both during and after Maidan, Ukraine's blossoming civil society was made up of people from different strata of society with different financial statuses, education, and cultural backgrounds. However, one crucial aspect can be noticed — the wave of initiatives for change usually came from the youth. Young adults were the main body of those who first came out on the streets with pro-EU slogans.¹¹ It was precisely young

8 See: Krapfl J., Kuhn von Burgsdorf E. 2023, 325–334; Kotsiuk V., Hutsalo L., Hryhorchak I., Havrysh A., Stadnyk O. 2025, 599–607.

9 As K. Zarembo and E. Martin indicate, Euromaidan prompted scholars to reinterpret the thesis concerning the weakness of Ukrainian civil society and to move away from linking social activism exclusively with organisational activity. They point to the existence of a 'society without organisations' in Ukraine. Zarembo K., Martin E. 2024, 208; Matviychuk O. 2024.

10 Matviychuk O. 2024.

11 Data presented by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation and the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology indicate that approximately 40% of those participating in the protests were young people, primarily students. Maidan-mitynh 2013.

adults who constituted the main group of people to take to the streets first, carrying pro-European slogans. The realisation of their own political powerlessness within a governance system still largely rooted in the legacy of the Soviet Union became a decisive factor in the engagement of young people in these actions in 2014. The absence of transparent mechanisms for youth participation in public life, the highly hierarchical structure of state institutions, the influence of the country's Soviet past, and the expansion of bureaucracy all contributed to a sense of helplessness and futility among the new generation — young enough not to remember the Soviet era, yet simultaneously aware of its pervasive influence. This is one of the reasons why young people tend to avoid state institutions and instead channel their potential into volunteer initiatives and the non-governmental sector.¹² The third sector, not dominated by hierarchy and bureaucracy, also provides young people with a sense of community with fellow citizens.

The scale of the Revolution of Dignity and the military actions that followed it, together with the power that young people gained by provoking drastic changes in both politics and society, had such a significant influence on the people involved that some of them united into the organisations that are still in operation. Moreover, following the onset of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022, their level of activity has been greater than at any point previously. Ukraine's experience in sustaining civil society is unique, as the scale of the crisis the country has faced since 2014 is the largest in Europe since the Second World War and has adversely affected all aspects of daily life, including the economy, housing, food security, mental health, and gender equality. At the same time, this crisis has acted as a catalyst for cooperation and for the unification of Ukrainians within their communities. Not only has the resilience of civil society organisations not weakened following 2014 and the subsequent full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war, but it has, in fact, been strengthened, rising from 3.4 in 2013 to 3.2 in 2022.¹³ Moreover, as statistics show,¹⁴ by December 2021, the total number of registered public associations (PAs) had reached 96,258 — an increase of 19,193, or 25%, since 2013. Likewise, registered charitable organisations (COs) experienced steady growth over the past decade, rising to 20,499 by the end of 2021, which is 5,598 more than in 2013 (a 38% increase). The full-scale invasion in 2022 led to fewer new PAs while sharply boosting the formation of new COs. Specifically, 2,760 PAs were established in 2022 (down from 4,360 in 2021, 3,739 in 2020, and 4,905 in 2019), whereas 6,367 new COs emerged in 2022, a notable jump from 830 in 2021, 723 in 2020, and 654 in 2019. The greatest concentration of these newly formed COs and PAs in 2022

¹² *Ukrainska molod* 2018.

¹³ CSO 2023.

¹⁴ *Hromadianske suspiilstvo Ukrainy* 2024.

was found in Kyiv and the Kyiv region, as well as in the Lviv, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Odesa regions.¹⁵

One notable example of such an organisation is the Come Back Alive Foundation, which provides a wide range of professional support to the military. Since 2014, they have helped the Armed Forces of Ukraine become more efficient — therefore not only systematically countering the enemy but also saving the lives of military personnel. The latter motive — to take care of Ukrainian soldiers and ensure that as few Ukrainians as possible must sacrifice their lives in defence of their country — has been the primary goal of civil society. People are united in their will to help the army, and the way engagement hubs function reflects this.

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, we have multiplied our military assistance and supported the defenders of Ukraine, who changed their everyday lives and joined the line of defence. The Foundation purchases equipment that helps save the lives of the military, including thermal imaging optics, quadcopters, cars, security, and intelligence systems. Since 2014, the Foundation has raised over UAH 4,5 billion or over USD 130 million for the needs of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and trained over 10,000 highly qualified military specialists.¹⁶

The colossal amount of money donated to these organisations testifies to the trust that Come Back Alive and similar organisations have gained since 2014. It is hard to find someone in Ukraine nowadays who wouldn't join the activities of such organisations, at least by donating. But it is not only big NGOs that raise money for charity — individual citizens as well come up with initiatives to cover the needs of someone from the military and fundraise without turning to state institutions or large-scale NGOs for help. Such individuals are called 'volontery' (*волонтери*); usually, they announce the fundraising on their private social media platforms and collect money through Banka, a tool created specifically for this kind of transaction by one of the biggest banks in Ukraine (Monobank). This tool allows donations to be collected legally and without the obligation to pay taxes. In these ways, by participating in big fundraisers and local ones, Ukrainian society is firmly united in resisting the invader.

The attitude of Ukrainians toward charity has changed. As the research project *Charity in times of war*¹⁷ demonstrates, 84% of Ukrainians noted that the scale of charity is growing, and they notice its rapid development. This also applies to trust in charitable institutions: if previously the level of trust was 'mediocre' (estimated at 2.66 points out of a possible 5 points in 2021), now it is 'rather high' (3.77 out of 5). The involvement of Ukrainians in charity has increased significantly — 86% of Ukrainian residents have donated to charity during the last year. The number of volunteers has

¹⁵ *Hromadianske suspilstvo Ukrainy* 2024.

¹⁶ *Come Back Alive* 2023.

¹⁷ *Blahodiinist u chasy viiny* 2023.

also increased. If in 2021 it was 5% of the population, then now it is about one-third. Together with changes in behaviour, there is also a change in motivation. Although compassion and awareness of the struggles of fellow citizens are still the most important factors that push people to action, new elements have appeared in the research: a sense of patriotism, a desire to participate in the solution of significant problems, and an awareness of one's duty to society.¹⁸

The Challenges that Ukrainian Civil Society Faces

Civil society organisations in post-Maidan Ukraine gained respect and trust. With that, the third sector became highly influential and powerful. Their activities are not limited to solving particular military or humanitarian issues but also include initiating social reforms, public oversight of the government, documentation of violations of human rights, and reporting crimes in the areas of armed conflict. In this way, civil society in Ukraine became a 'parallel state,'¹⁹ cooperating with government institutions, sometimes substituting for them, and in particular cases opposing them. However, there are specific problems with how the civil society in Ukraine is functioning: the third sector is failing to translate its vital activity into much-needed reform of the state institutions that are deciding the country's future. Currently, NGOs in Ukraine are performing many of the activities that state institutions should be.

As Evgeny Hlibovetskyi, an expert on long-term strategies and the values of Ukrainian society, points out:

We are constantly putting patches on the tattered body of Ukrainian state institutions [...]. We must finally move on to creating institutions that are not post-Soviet but those that we need for the future [...]. It seems to me that Ukrainian society has desensitised this process, advancing trust in state institutions. We must prepare for the next period. This next period is the creation of new institutions, new rules, new systems of rules and institutions that oversee them.²⁰

This can be considered a logical end to the complete cycle of changes that were initiated as a part of EuroMaidan resolutions — society has to build a new system, a new set of rules and ways in which the country functions that will enable civil society to act strategically, instead of constantly putting out fires and solving urgent problems by doing what is supposed to be done by government institutions in a well-thought-out and planned manner.

¹⁸ *Blahodiinist u chasy viiny* 2023.

¹⁹ *Civil Society in Ukraine*.

²⁰ *Yak hromadianske suspilstvo* 2022.

Another challenge is the need to pay attention to the continuity of reforms. Reform shouldn't be postponed simply by blaming the war. According to the Vox Ukraine poll regarding the importance of the reforms at the current stage of the crisis, the vast majority of respondents (81%) identify the fight against corruption as the most vital issue. Of next importance are health care reform (52%), judicial reform (47%), education reform (41%), and pension reform (40%). In the future, citizens expect the reforms to reduce corruption or embezzlement of the budget (71%), increase well-being (63%), and use public funds more efficiently (39%). At the same time, corruption and misuse of public funds (78%) and the war with Russia (53%) are viewed as the major obstacles to reforms.²¹

An equally important problem from the point of view of building civil society is the restriction of the activities of civil rights organisations in times of war, in favour of humanitarian organisations. As statistics show, the main domain of activity for Civil Society Organisations is supporting the army, veterans (43,2%), while only 13% of organisations were involved in protecting human rights.²² Representatives of such organisations also note a decline in public interest and participation in this area. Marina Khromykh, executive director of the DEJURE Foundation, says: 'Today, we cannot afford to postpone reforms or the demand of justice for those enemies who are here in the rear, who, unfortunately, feel absolutely safe, because all the attention of society and the international community is focused on the war.'²³ A significant part of society expects, not NGOs, but the military, which has gained respect and trust through serving their country in the most challenging way, to come back from the battlefield and starting changes in the political system, law enforcement agencies, the judicial system, and local governments. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many engagement hubs that, before the war, were performing in the field of human rights activism, youth, education, and gender equality switched their focus to assisting the Armed forces, forming and supplying volunteer battalions, and providing support for internally displaced people. The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology shows that only a quarter (24,7%) of civil society organisations that started their work before the full-scale war continued to work exclusively in their usual fields after the invasion began. 18.8% of organisations reoriented their activity to meet new challenges, while the majority (56.4%) of civil society organisations combined the priorities of pre-war work with new fields.²⁴

Civil society must resist aggression without becoming an authoritarian state, and be wary of the significant dehumanisation, radicalisation, and polarisation which

21 Sologoub I. 2023.

22 *Hromadianske suspiilstvo Ukrainy* 2024.

23 Matviychuk O. 2024.

24 *Ukrainian Civil Society* 2023.

can occur as a result of a full-scale war and the tragic events that follow. This underscores a critical threat to the development of a resilient and inclusive civil society in Ukraine, as ongoing conflict and the resulting societal fatigue undermine civic engagement, erode trust in democratic institutions, and make it increasingly difficult to maintain the openness and cooperation essential for building a healthy public sphere.

Even the humanitarian sphere, which receives significant attention from NGOs, faces acute problems and challenges that still lack systematic solutions. In particular, the field of support for internally displaced persons is especially problematic. According to data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, as of February 10, 2023, over 17.7 million Ukrainians in Ukraine needed humanitarian assistance, and 13.4 million had been forced to leave their homes temporarily or long-term, or in many cases permanently. Engagement hubs operating in this sector have yet to move from the constant distribution of humanitarian aid to the systematic and large-scale creation of employment opportunities so that families of displaced persons can provide for themselves. Such employment is also vital to creating a sense of fulfilment among displaced people and to combating feelings of frustration and loss.

This task has been challenging because many international partners of humanitarian Civil Society Organisations in Ukraine only knew humanitarian aid in certain countries of Africa or Asia, with no specific understanding of Ukraine or its development and context. Even today, these aspects do not allow international organisations to develop the most effective cooperation with local state and public partners. On the other hand, the Ukrainian civil society itself was not prepared for the scale of the disaster that had to be faced, as well as for the scale of work and cooperation with foreign partners and did not understand the challenges associated with it.

In order to solve the humanitarian crisis issues, changes in the way civil society institutions function should be implemented. As the specialists at the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs suggest,²⁵ the most crucial difference is that humanitarian aid needs to be seen as development work from a visionary, contextual, and strategic perspective. The goal of humanitarian help is to prevent the victim from deteriorating, primarily morally and physically. The purpose of the aid is not to make a person dependent but to create favourable conditions so that they can help themselves and others in close cooperation with local authorities, entrepreneurs, and public organisations.

Another critical point that Ukrainian and some international organisations comment on is that the humanitarian aid methods of the past years have become over-bureaucratised, conceptually outdated, and, unfortunately, not always

²⁵ *Ukraine Humanitarian Response 2023*.

humanitarian-centric, which often harms the environment in the broadest sense of the word.²⁶ Such assistance requires too much unnecessary paperwork that consumes both human and material resources. A significant part of the financial, human, and communication resources is spent on the organisation alone — ideally, these resources should be applied more innovatively and effectively. Ideally, those resources should be directed to local organisations, making it possible for them to hire employees on a more permanent basis and for a more extended period. This would, on the one hand, strengthen their professional, institutional development and institutional memory, and on the other hand, support the state and society through the payment of taxes for each full-time employee.

Another important aspect is that humanitarian aid should be focused (as much as circumstances allow) on the education of both children and adults, as the irreplaceable investment into the strategic solutions of both wartime issues and hypothetical post-war problems. ‘It is education that is the backbone of hope for the future and resilience, and it is the children of today, and the adults of tomorrow, who will be the ones who will rebuild the country for decades to come after the Russian aggression.’²⁷ Education is a critical factor in creating new jobs and innovative enterprises, taking care of international visibility, and enhancing cooperation. Funding for the education sector should be increased to meet the educational needs of Ukrainian children and adults and to develop relevant educational institutions and initiatives.

While strengthening education systems represents a strategic investment in the long-term resilience and innovative capacity of Ukrainian society, sustainable progress also requires a robust legal and institutional framework to support and guide these developments. It is in this context that the creation and advancement of the Map of Legal Reforms²⁸ emerges as a crucial step toward optimising the functioning of Ukraine’s civil society. This document, the first and only of its kind, united over 150 NGOs and charitable organisations from all the regions of Ukraine; 250 experts worked together on the map for six months. As a result, the co-authors formed a reform agenda for civil society in Ukraine, which not only contains a detailed picture of the problems, difficulties, and obstacles faced by the public sector but also offers a set of steps that will allow these problems to be solved. The Map identified 91 issues that currently concern public and charitable organisations, self-organisation bodies of the population, and initiative groups, and offered 307 solutions to solve the problems stated. Among the questions raised by the co-authors of the Map, the most important ones are:

26 Lutsevych O. 2023.

27 Lutsevych O. 2023.

28 *Karta pravovykh reform 2023.*

- Lack of a favourable legal environment for the development of civil society in Ukraine
- Absence of transparent procedures and tenders referring to the distribution of the budget funds allocated for CSOs
- Unfavourable tax environment for NGOs, charitable and volunteer organisations
- The existence of real threats to the life and health of Ukrainian activists

The very existence of such risks and obstacles has created a predisposition for developing the Map of Legal Reforms. The National Strategy for Civil Society in Ukraine for 2021–2025 is based on the Map's provisions and proposals.

Conclusions

According to the results of the study *Ukrainian Civil Society During Wartime*,²⁹ the expectations about how civil society will function after a war do not depend on how long the war lasts. As long as military action continues, the main request from the society will be the satisfaction of basic needs. Focus shifts to reforms and reconstruction only when military action is over. As most of the survey participants agree, reconstruction is not possible without civil society support.

In this process, the most essential tasks of civil society will be:

- Re-establishing the mechanisms of local democracy
- Creating a dialogue between the community, business, and government
- Consulting local and state institutions on a wide range of issues (depending on the specifics of Civil Society Organisation competency)
- Taking part in creating amendments to legislation, control, and advocacy of implementing changes
- Representing the needs of all interested parties in the process of restoration
- Control over the authorities' actions
- Ensuring restoration decisions and funding distribution are open and honest

Only by making sure that these roles are fulfilled can Ukrainian society expect the restoration to be successful. It is important to mention that Ukraine will not be starting its recovery from scratch. Before the Russian invasion in February 2022, Ukrainian civil society was already working to increase the involvement of citizens in policy-making and governance processes. Since 2010, Ukrainian legislation has provided for public consultations in the process of developing all new state policy documents and regulatory legal acts at the national and regional levels. Cities have incorporated various participatory tools into their charters, including community consultations, public hearings, and participatory budgeting, allowing citizens to use digital technology to vote on projects they believe are worthy of municipal funding. Launched in 2017,

²⁹ *Ukrainian Civil Society 2023*.

the ‘Transparent Cities’ initiative³⁰ encourages local authorities to work more openly, mainly through reporting of all expenses, live broadcasting of meetings of councils at various levels, and the publication of all laws and regulations.

Currently, many active youth and volunteer councils contribute to the creation of jobs for internally displaced persons and assist young migrants. The recent experience of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, which proved the possibility of practical cooperation between CSOs, the private sector, and local authorities, allowed for rapid mobilisation to provide support to the civilian population as soon as Russia launched the full-scale invasion.³¹

Having a successful experience of cooperation between the state and civil society in the preparation and implementation of transformational reforms, Ukraine will be able to fully control the reconstruction process. Its citizens have shown remarkable courage and powerful resilience in the face of an existential threat. The subsequent recovery work must build on these advantages, designed also to reduce the risks that could threaten Ukraine’s post-war future.

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30 Research of transparency 2023.

31 Lutsevych O. 2020.

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