

Civil society in Ukraine – the present landscape with special reference to democracy-building and democratic innovation

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19 January 2026

Introduction

Civil society in Ukraine can, in broad terms, be described as voluntary, self-organised citizen action that serves as a mediator between public authorities and citizens (EUR-Lex, n.d.). The organisation of civil society in Ukraine was strongly influenced by the events unfolding as of late 2013 (Euromaidan – a wave of demonstrations beginning in November 2013, the war in eastern Ukraine, decentralisation) and 2022 (the Russian full-scale invasion). Civil society has assumed state roles, such as supplying recruits, supporting refugees, and restoring buildings and infrastructure (Lux, 2025). Civil society organisations continue to strengthen democracy in the country through citizen participation, helping change Ukraine for the better even during the war.

This paper outlines the landscape of civil society in Ukraine, highlighting major umbrella organisations and examining how they promote democracy through gender equality, participatory practices, and democratic innovation.

The Present Landscape of Civil Society

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the support for volunteer organisations from the population has flourished. The number of charitable organisations grew by 57% in 2022. Subsequently, the growth rate slowed, the number of public organisations increased by 10% to over 107,000, and the number of registered volunteers exceeded 11,000 (Semenyuta, 2025). Moreover, survey data indicate important differences in how Ukrainians engage with civil society. Approximately 70% of respondents report willingness to support volunteer initiatives, understood as informal efforts often organised at the local level, either financially or through other resources (Khrystynovych, 2025). By contrast, only 16% prefer to donate to charitable foundations, which represent more institutionalised actors within civil society (Khrystynovych, 2025).

WHO WOULD YOU PREFER TO SUPPORT

financially or through volunteering: Charitable foundations or personal initiatives?

N=2400

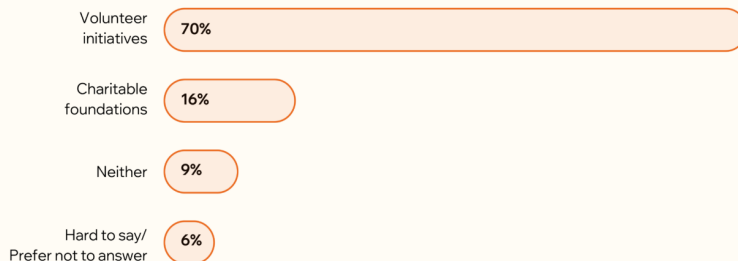


Figure 1. Who would you prefer to support: Charitable foundations or personal initiatives?
Source: VoxUkraine (Khrystynovych, 2025).

Today, civil society is active across several vital sectors in Ukraine, influencing democratic change and the country's future accession to the EU. Those sectors include:

- human rights, where organisations document war crimes, support victims, and advocate in the international and national arenas (e.g., the Center for Civil Liberties, the Media Initiative for Human Rights, Truth Hounds);
- the anti-corruption sector, where organisations help monitor governmental spending and government-affiliated anti-corruption bodies (Transparency International Ukraine, the Anti-Corruption Action Center);
- the gender equality sector, which helps to strengthen women's participation in Ukrainian politics (the Ukrainian Women's Fund, Women's Perspectives);
- the local self-government sector plays a particularly important role by enabling municipalities to address local needs, restore buildings damaged by the war, and ensure public participation in decision-making processes (U-LEAD with Europe, BUR, Dobrobat). This prominently illustrates how, during the war, Ukrainian civil society works to uphold democratic values, connecting it to Europe and the Western world.

To continue, Ukrainian civil society organisations join coalition organisations, which help them strengthen democracy more effectively and fill gaps in the institutional apparatus (Rybiy, 2024). One example is the Reanimation Package of Reforms (RPR) – a coalition of reform-oriented NGOs that supports reforms and strengthens civil society nationwide (RPR, n.d.). The RPR has advocated more than 70 legislative reforms in the areas of justice, education, and anti-corruption (Rybiy, 2024). The next one is ISAR Ednannia, which supports the development of civil society and strengthens democracy-building initiatives in Ukraine by providing up to 600 grants annually

to social initiatives (ISAR Ednannia, n.d.). Other key networks in Ukraine include the Ukrainian Women's Fund and UN Women Ukraine, which focus on gender civil activism. The Ukrainian Women's Fund supports women's organisations in building a powerful movement to defend women's rights and advance gender equality in all spheres (UWF, n.d.). UN Women Ukraine collaborates with women's rights organisations to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, particularly in war-affected regions (UN Women Ukraine, n.d.). The last example is the RISE Ukraine Coalition, which promotes integrity and participation in Ukraine's reconstruction by ensuring transparency, fair compensation, digital oversight, and citizen and business involvement in planning and monitoring (RISE Ukraine, n.d.).

Democracy and Gender

During times of war, Ukrainian civil society has emerged as a vital player in democratic development and gender equality. Ukrainian organisations are effectively ensuring that women's voices are heard in Ukrainian politics and advancing gender equality across all spheres of life. Organisations such as Women's March Ukraine, Gender in Detail, and the Ukrainian Women's Congress support women's rights, equality, and the voices in politics and business in Ukraine (Women's March Ukraine, n.d.; Gender in Detail, n.d.; Ukrainian Women's Congress, n.d.). Moreover, these organisations illustrate how gender equality is linked to democratic values through the expansion of women's participation and representation in political life, and they also address issues such as human rights and social justice (Ukrainian Women's Fund, n.d.; UN Women, 2023; Mathers, 2024).

It is essential to note that international donors play a significant role in supporting the development of civil society in Ukraine. Organisations such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provide funds that help rebuild Ukraine, strengthen NGOs through enhanced gender equality and institutional support, and further integration into the EU (EU Neighbours East, 2023; UNDP Ukraine, 2024).

Participatory Democracy

In Ukraine, NGOs and civil society initiatives have been driving participatory democracy and democratic innovations. Since the Euromaidan protests of 2013–2014, Ukrainians have had more opportunities to engage in Ukraine's political life through online petitions, community councils ("hromady"), and NGOs. Participatory democracy can be defined as the process by which citizens participate in decision-making and influence change (Council of Europe, n.d.). For instance, the Council of Europe (2024) project "Participatory Democracy: A Key Factor in Ukraine's Resilience" highlights initiatives such as School Participatory Budgeting and Ukraine's first-ever Citizens' Assemblies in Slavutych and Zvyahel. NGOs such as Holka and the Democracy Development Center, host initiatives to strengthen democracy, the rule of law, transparency, and anti-corruption efforts within Ukraine (DDC, 2022; EED, 2025).

To continue, the democratic innovation is “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process” (Smith, 2009, p. 1). The statistics indicate that progress in participatory democracy is going up. One reason for this was the war, which united people in times of crisis. The participation rate has steadily grown from 33.19% in 2023 to 36.91% in 2024 (CID, 2025). Furthermore, since 2022, local communities and NGOs have participated in reconstruction projects, thereby strengthening democratic participation in Ukraine. Organisations such as BUR (Building Ukraine Together) and Dobrobat focus on engaging volunteers across the country to rebuild, repair, and support local communities in the liberated and frontline regions (BUR, n.d.; Dobrobat, n.d.).

Democratic Innovation (the digital state)

Since the invasion in 2022 by Russia, Ukrainian democracy transformed to a new level. The digital platform Diia ensured the stable, continuous access to digital documents, public services, and civilian interaction with the government during the war (GovCx, 2023). Moreover, the Diia allows citizens who have been displaced from their homes or moved abroad to identify themselves without a passport, to receive government support in various situations, and to access and apply for state support programmes (GovCx, 2023). This allowed governmental institutions to shift from physical interaction to more remote forms to maintain a stable connection with the country's citizens and support democratic legitimacy during wartime. Furthermore, the full-scale invasion also changed the way civil society develops in the digital sphere. The E-Governance for Accountability and Participation Program (EGAP) created a digital tool, E-DEM, which serves as a platform for the more straightforward implementation of civil society projects. Through this platform, users can sign petitions, provide feedback, and monitor projects online (EGAP, n.d.). Moreover, platforms such as ProZorro (Ukraine's open public procurement system) and DREAM (Digital Reconstruction Ecosystem for Accountable Management) offer opportunities for public oversight and transparency in spending on reconstruction (Prozorro, n.d.; DREAM, n.d.). Ukrainian volunteers and civil society have developed a new form of digital volunteering, such as donating to the army. A clear example of this is the foundation “Come Back Alive”, which raises major funds for the military effort (Come Back Alive, n.d.). In this case, democratic innovations can be described as processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence (Elstub & Escobar, 2019)

Ocular Democracy and Plebeian Democracy

Ocular democracy began to gain popularity in Ukraine as a response to the invasion and the reduced likelihood of continuing normal democratic initiatives. In Jeffrey Green's theory of ocular democracy, democratic empowerment is understood not primarily through the people's voice, but through visibility and spectatorship, whereby citizens exercise democratic power by observing, scrutinising, and judging political leaders (Green, 2009). On the other hand, the

plebeian democracy is the direct relationship between political leaders and ordinary citizens, reducing reliance on elite mediators (Green, 2009).

This is suitable for contemporary Ukraine, where President Volodymyr Zelensky has been posting daily videos and communicating primarily through social media, fostering a sense of shared struggle among Ukrainians. As Dyczok and Chung (2022) demonstrate, the videos serve as a tool of leadership that mobilises society and appeals directly to citizens without the mediation of the media filter or other elites. Furthermore, these videos are working as well as the counter-disinformation instrument against Russian narratives by providing information from official sources during the information war (Dyczok & Chung, 2022). Moreover, Tsybka (2024) argues that the possibility for citizens to observe the government's day-to-day actions in real time only increases the president's accountability during the war.

Conclusion

Ukrainian civil society, in the face of the war with Russia, is one of the most resilient pillars of the country's democracy. Volunteer initiatives, NGOs, and local organisations are key drivers of transparency in reconstruction, anti-corruption efforts, accountability of the Ukrainian government, gender equality, and the strengthening of participatory and innovative democracy through the development of digital tools and new approaches to crisis management. The Russian invasion has also fostered new forms of democratic engagement in Ukraine, such as ocular democracy and plebeian democracy. These new forms were created by President Volodymyr Zelensky through daily videos and social media, fostering cooperation among Ukrainians and preventing disinformation. Moreover, international partners support Ukrainian civil society in developing a new model of democracy built from below, from society. Maintenance of this strong course of action by civil society is vital to post-war reconstruction and to the possibility of successful accession to the European Union.

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