

Civil Society in Ukraine

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Executive summary

This literature review examines participatory and deliberative democratic practices in Ukraine within the context of civil society development, focusing on the period from 2014 to 2025. The analysis reveals a dynamic and evolving landscape in Ukrainian civil society, which was traditionally characterized as weak when measured by formal organizational metrics, has demonstrated significant capacity for mobilization, adaptation, and institutional innovation. The review proposes a framework for categorizing civil society activities into workable clusters.

1. Defining Civil Society in the Ukrainian Context

Conceptual Challenges and Post-Soviet Trajectories

Scholars studying Ukrainian civil society have consistently struggled with core questions of definition and analysis. The dominant western approach, anchored in the work of (Salamon & Anheier, 1998) treats the nonprofit sector as a proxy for civil society, has shown inadequate for understanding Ukrainian realities. When measured by formal organizational membership and structural capacity, Ukrainian civil society appeared weak. By September 2021, the Democratic Initiatives Foundation reported that only 4% of Ukrainians were actively involved in civil society organization activities (USAID, 2021). And only 7% claimed to be regular participants in community events. According to the same poll only 22% donated money to charitable or civil society organizations in the 12 month prior to September 2021 (USAID, 2021).

This obvious weakness masked an analytical blind spot. As (Stewart & Dollbaum, 2017) argue in their comparative study of Russian and Ukrainian civil society trajectories, "non-formal actors have not yet found their way into civil society literature to a satisfying degree." For the post-Soviet space, where informal networks historically played central roles in social life and political engagement since Soviet times, formal organizational measures systematically undercount civic participation and capacity.

1.2 SOC and SOCR

Zaremba and Martin (2024) offered a new way of looking at civil society: as voluntary, civic-minded activities that happen outside the home, family, government, and marketplace.

They argue that any act, whether individual or group, formal or informal, nonprofit or private, is part of civil society if it is guided by civic values. This shift puts the focus on people's motivation and actions, rather than the formal structures of organizations, and better matches how Ukrainians themselves view and engage in civil life.

Building on community psychology frameworks, Zaremba and Martin introduce the concepts of the "sense of community" (SOC) and the "sense of community responsibility" (SOCR) as analytically productive for understanding Ukrainian civil society. In surveys taken in 2022, Ukrainians described civil society in terms of values, collective solidarity, and responsibility to their communities, often prioritizing these principles above formal membership in organizations (Zaremba & Martin, 2024, p. 205)

The survey data presented by Zaremba and Martin across three periods (2014-2017 Euromaidan era; 2018-2021 relative stability; 2022 full-scale invasion) shows how SOC and SOCR activate during moments of shock. When communities face existential threats, even a civil society that seems quiet, can quickly mobilize, with civic engagement jumping to 60-80% during crises. Zaremba and Martin call this the activation of "dormant civil society", helping to explain why Ukrainian civic life often seems to transform in dramatic ways when needed most (Zaremba & Martin, 2024, p. 224)

2. The Wartime Transformation of Ukrainian Civil Society

2.1 Wartime Adaptation and Democratic Resilience Under Martial Law

During the war, primarily formal organizational structures gave way to more fluid, informal networks that could respond rapidly to emerging crises. Ukrainian civil society demonstrated extraordinary capacity for self-organization, the number of humanitarian NGOs, more than tripled from approximately 150 to over 450 organizations within months of the invasion. This expansion reflected both the scale of humanitarian needs and the willingness of Ukrainian citizens to take collective action in defence of their communities and nation. The pattern of mobilization built upon earlier experiences from the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution and the subsequent hybrid war in eastern Ukraine but exceeded all previous levels of civic engagement (National Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025)

2.2 Categories of Civil Society Activities after 2022

Ukrainian civil society activities in the post-2022 period can be organized into several major functional categories, each addressing critical societal needs arising from the war. The largest and most visible category is **humanitarian and crisis response** sector that encompasses support for internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, and civilian victims of war hostilities. These organisations coordinate emergency evacuations, provide shelter and necessities, distribute humanitarian aid, and offer psychological support to traumatized populations. The scale of displacement (starting in 2015 with approximately 1.6 million IDPs)

created enormous pressure on both state institutions and civil society organizations to develop rapid response mechanisms (Stewart & Dollbaum, 2017).

CSOs help national security through **military support activities** that is exclusive to times of war. This includes volunteer movements supplying equipment, vehicles, drones, and other resources to armed forces; initiatives producing military equipment; training centers for soldiers; and organizations providing medical support to wounded combatants. Some volunteer battalions formed at the war's outset have evolved into professional military suppliers or specialized training facilities, demonstrating the professionalization trajectory of initially spontaneous civic initiatives. Organizations such as the Volunteer Movement have proven well in supporting both soldiers in combat zones and civilians in affected areas (Zarembo & Martin, 2024)

In order to protect democracy in Ukraine, civil society has been taking on the **advocacy and monitoring role**. Post-Euromaidan civil society actors, particularly those grouped in coalitions like the Reanimation Package of Reforms (RPR), have established themselves as critical monitors of government accountability, anti-corruption efforts, and reform implementation. These organizations have successfully embedded oversight mechanisms into virtually all government sectors, maintaining pressure on officials to adhere to European standards and combat endemic corruption. The watchdog function has proven particularly important given historical challenges with governance quality and the risk that wartime exigencies might provide cover for corrupt practices. (Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law, 2020)

Social service provision includes healthcare initiatives, educational programming, support for vulnerable populations including children and elderly, and community development projects. In places impacted by military activities or where governmental infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed, civil society organizations have intervened to close gaps in the provision of state services. This includes organizations like [Insha Osvita](#), which shifted from cultural education to protecting cultural infrastructure, and [Rokada](#), which leverages experience with asylum seekers to integrate IDPs through local IDP councils. The provision of social services by civil society has become increasingly sophisticated, with many organizations developing professional capacity and creating long-term operating strategies.

During the war, **veteran reintegration and support** became a top concern, civil society organizations started to provide prosthetics, create employment opportunities, deliver mental health services, and facilitate social integration for returned soldiers. Survey data from Ukrainian CSOs identified veteran reintegration as the single most important societal challenge requiring collaborative attention. This category shows that successful post-war recovery depends fundamentally on supporting those who faced the military service and ensuring their productive return to civilian life.

Cultural preservation and protection activities gained urgency as Russian forces systematically targeted Ukrainian cultural infrastructure, which led to cultural genocide.

Organizations work to document and protect cultural heritage sites, preserve art works, support cultural practitioners, and resist what the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe described as Russia's use of "cultural cleansing" as a weapon to destroy Ukrainian identity (Center of domestic policy studies, 2023)

Additional but less popular among CSOs categories include **human rights protection and legal support; youth and education initiatives** addressing disrupted schooling for a wartime generation; **environmental governance; women's rights and gender-based violence prevention; recovery and reconstruction planning;** and **digital innovation** including development of e-services for veterans and IDPs. The diversity of activities reflects civil society's deep involvement across all sectors of social life, with organizations often specializing in specific fields while collaborating through coalitions and networks (Ednannia, 2025)

3. Interaction Between Civil Society, State, and Local Governance

Important legal frameworks were developed from 2011 to 2022, such as the 2012 Law "On Public Organizations" which simplified NGO registration and operations, and the 2011 Law "On Volunteer Work", though the latter created complications by requiring special registration and insurance payments. Cabinet resolutions in 2010 and 2011 attempted to facilitate consultation with civil society and public grant procedures, though implementation frequently lagged legislative intent. During this period, legal harassment of civil society organizations by government agencies was reported, particularly after Victor Yanukovich's 2010 presidential election, with intelligence services intimidating NGOs and conducting investigations. On the contrast, progressive legislation alongside inadequate implementation and occasional harassment, characterized state-civil society relations in the pre-2022 period. (Kachmarska, 2024)

Kyiv-based CSOs report improvement in state efforts to engage civil society compared to 2022, though many organizations view cooperation in recovery delivery as still inadequate. The government has become more responsive to civil society input. Civil society first raises concerns with relevant government agencies and proposes solutions, with responsive government action praised by both civil society and media. This collaborative approach does not diminish the watchdog role. Oversight mechanisms are now integrated across sectors, with specialized NGOs closely monitoring government institutions. High-level officials have resigned following public dissatisfaction expressed through civil society campaigns. For example, in 2025, the Cabinet of Ministers suspended the head of the State Drug Service of Ukraine, Roman Isayenko, after an investigation by Bihus.Info, an independent investigative journalist group (Bihus.info, 2025)

The **decentralization reform**, which was started in 2014 significantly increased the authority local self-government organizations and created new opportunities for citizen participation in community decision-making. The goal was to combine small towns into bigger units thus improving capabilities of local administration (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine,

2014) However, the 2022 invasion followed by the martial law gave more powers to military administrations, compromising the decentralization program. Limited Western funding and resource mobilization for armed forces has led to substantial decreases in local budgets, limiting civil society partnership opportunities. Despite these challenges, cooperation between NGOs and local authorities remains more effective than with national government, with 80% of surveyed NGOs reporting major improvements in cooperation with local and regional authorities, compared to only 25% reporting improvement with national-level authorities (Dokalenko, 2022)

Despite general improvements, there are still issues with the engagement between the state and civil society. According to CSOs, one of the major issues is inadequate planning and delivery collaboration from state officials (Ednannia, 2025, p. 32) Lack of information and understanding of advantages of collaboration on the side of authorities destroys effective partnership. Financial support from the Ukrainian state to civil society remains relatively insignificant compared to international funding, limiting state capacity to shape civil society priorities through resource allocation. Moreover, bureaucratic obstacles, inconsistent implementation of consultation requirements, and unequal treatment of organizations in tax policy create operational difficulties (Ukraine, 2021)

4. Participatory and Deliberative Democratic Mechanisms

The development of participatory and deliberative democratic procedures, especially at the local level has been greatly supported by Ukrainian civil society. Apart from typical elections, citizens can participate in governance practices. The distinction between participatory and deliberative approaches is analytically useful, though in practice many Ukrainian initiatives combine elements of both (Hanzhuk, 2024).

At both the local and national levels, **participatory budgeting** represents probably the most significant participatory democratic innovation in Ukraine. At the municipal level, cities like Poltava implemented participatory budgeting beginning in 2016 to develop democratic society, improve dialogue between authorities and communities, create public space, address socially important issues, and activate residents' involvement in budget processes. The national-level innovation is particularly remarkable: amendments to Ukraine's Budget Code established an all-Ukrainian Participatory Budgeting mechanism that allocates up to 10% of the State Regional Development Fund through citizen participation across all 24 regions. Citizens can submit project proposals, identify priorities through electronic voting, and monitor implementation of winning projects. This encourages local communities' institutional development and acts as an important tool for financial decentralization. The national participatory budgeting model is multi-layered, adaptive, and designed to take into account various types of self-government, including different forms of financing and administration.(Buletsa, 2016)

Public consultations received significant regulatory enhancement through the 2024 Law "On Public Consultations," which mandated broad consultations by state authorities and

local self-government bodies when making decisions. Compared to earlier systems where consultations were required for state authorities but only advisory for local governments (where requirements were regularly disregarded), this statute signified a structural development. The new legislation defines principles for citizen participation in decision-making, establishes procedures for initiating and conducting consultations, specifies forms and tools for participation (including meetings, surveys, public hearings, and electronic consultations), sets discussion timelines, and creates mechanisms for incorporating public input. Regional authorities have begun developing regulations on public consultations tailored to their communities, as exemplified by Vinnytsia City Territorial Community's initiative involving civil society organizations in drafting consultation procedures. The consultation process is conceptualized in three stages: information exchange (disclosure of information under discussion), consultation (two-way information exchange and vision development), and participation (inviting parties to develop bills or policies) (On Public Consultations, 2024)

Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs) represent an innovative model for institutionalized partnerships between local/regional authorities and civil society, supporting civic engagement with local authorities and transnational cooperation. The Association of European Local Democracy Agencies established LDAs in Dnipro (2015), Mariupol (2017), and Odesa (2023), with plans for new agencies in Vinnytsia, Bucha, Rivne, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, and Lviv. These agencies aim to empower decentralized democratic structures across Ukraine's territory, promote city-to-city partnerships with EU municipalities, and direct long-term strategy for green recovery and reconstruction post-conflict. LDAs create permanent consultative status with local authorities and develop sustainability and action plans for multi-year cycles (ALDA, 2023).

Similarly, **Youth Councils** have been established in multiple municipalities to involve young people in decision-making processes, recognizing the importance of youth participation in democratic governance. (Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine, 2025)

The **Roadmap on the Functioning of Democratic Institutions**, approved as a prerequisite for EU accession negotiations, defines comprehensive measures to strengthen civil society participation. The roadmap's section on "Role of Civil Society" contains measures targeting adoption of documents on civil society development; ensuring public consultations and involving civil society in policymaking; implementing transparency standards; promoting volunteering and local democracy; improving financial support mechanisms for civil society; and facilitating interaction between civil society and law enforcement. Implementation of these benchmarks would significantly enhance institutionalization of public participation across governance levels (Ukraine, 2025).

Deliberative elements are most noticeable in the substantive engagement mechanisms, where citizens not only express preferences but engage in reasoned discussion about community priorities and policy alternatives. The requirement for public consultations to include information exchange, consultation, and participation stages reflects deliberative principles. Similarly, the work of public councils, when functioning effectively, involves

deliberation among diverse stakeholders to develop informed policy recommendations. (Kachmarska, 2024)

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