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# Civil Society and Democratic Resilience in Ukraine

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## Lessons for EU Institutions

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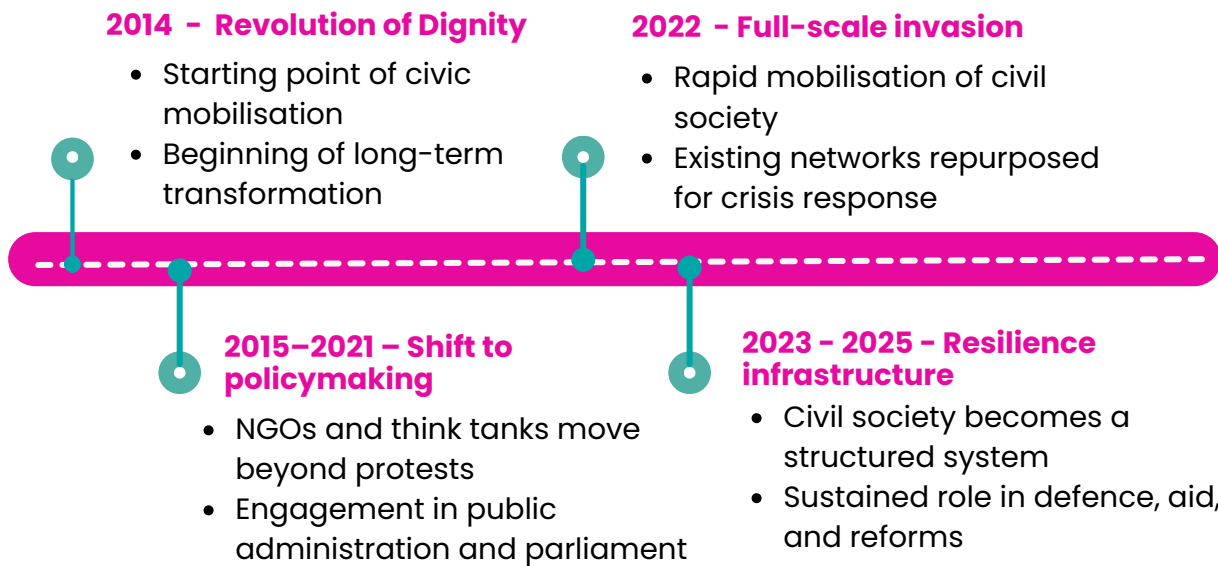
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Ukraine demonstrates that an organised, trusted and adaptable civil society is a crucial pillar for democratic resilience under large-scale aggression, just as formal institutions and armed forces. For EU institutions, Ukraine is a live test case of how civic actors can sustain democracy, constrain overreach and innovate under extreme stress, offering concrete lessons for EU enlargement policy, resilience agendas and civil-society support instruments.

## From Protest Waves to Resilience Infrastructure

Since the Revolution of Dignity, Ukrainian civil society has transformed from episodic protest into an infrastructure of resilience.

### Evolution of Civil Society in Ukraine



Source: author

NGOs, think tanks, and informal networks moved from the streets into policymaking, joined public administration and parliament, and built powerful volunteer- and donation-based systems to support the army and displaced persons (Pekar, 2025; Stepanenko & Stewart, 2025). This continuity of engagement meant that, when full-scale invasion began, Ukraine already had dense networks, leadership, and trust capital ready to be repurposed for defence, humanitarian assistance and reform monitoring.

Interestingly, the profile of CSOs had little influence on how effectively they launched an immediate response to a full-scale war. As long as they had institutional capacity, personnel, and prior project management experience, they were able to organise work quickly. Regardless of their previous area of expertise, be it ecological activism or Eurointegration advocacy, many civil society organizations (CSOs) adapted to address the new needs arising from the war.

# 42.2 %

of CSOs focused primarily on supporting the army

Only 24.7% of CSOs and charitable foundations maintained their pre-war focus, while 18.8% fully shifted to new wartime needs. The majority (56.4%) blended their previous priorities with new areas of work. Assistance to the army became the main focus for 42.2% of CSOs (Yednannya, 2023).

## Lesson for the EU:

Support should focus not only on “democratic breakthroughs” but on turning protest energy into durable civic infrastructures. This implies long-term funding for watchdogs, think tanks, and volunteer-based organisations, and the integration of civil-society capacity-building into enlargement, neighbourhood, and resilience programmes.

## Trust, Professionalisation and Local Embeddedness

Standard indicators that register low formal NGO membership underestimate Ukraine’s civil-society strength (Kudlenko, 2023; Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2022). In practice, volunteers and CSOs enjoy very high public trust: over two-thirds of Ukrainians trusted volunteers before 2022, and above 80% afterwards, while more than 60% express trust in CSOs (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2025; Razumkov Centre, 2025).

Debates about “NGO-isation” and donor dependence remain relevant (Burlyuk et al., 2017), yet wartime experience shows that professional, donor-funded NGOs with deep local roots were indispensable in the first months of the invasion. They knew local communities, had lists of vulnerable groups, maintained partnerships with international donors and were flexible enough to redirect resources where they were most needed, while large international organisations took months to launch initial activities, to scale up and to understand local Ukrainian context.

## Lesson for the EU:

Professionalisation can be a resilience multiplier when combined with local embeddedness and horizontal accountability. EU instruments should explicitly value partnerships between professional NGOs and grassroots initiatives, use flexible and rapid-response funding windows, and avoid crowding out informal networks that are often the fastest movers in crisis situations.

## Local Crisis - Response Networks with NGOs

A key, often overlooked, dimension of Ukraine’s democratic resilience is the emergence of local crisis-response networks in which hromada (municipal) authorities coordinate closely with NGOs, volunteer groups, IDPs, businesses and informal initiatives. These networks have become critical nodes of resilience under martial law, especially where elected self-government still operates alongside or within military administrations.

### *Local crisis response mechanisms and their impact on resilience*

Local cooperation mechanisms	Impact / Outcomes
Joint crisis centres (evacuation, shelters)	Faster and more coordinated response
Shared information channels on humanitarian needs	More efficient information distribution
Co-designed systems for identifying vulnerable populations	Better targeted support

Cooperation between authorities, NGOs, volunteers, and businesses	Improved resource sharing
Shift from ad hoc coordination to structured mechanisms	Increased preparedness
Involvement of civil society in decision-making	Greater local legitimacy
Community participation in processes	Sustained democratic participation
Cooperation under martial law conditions	Increased public trust

Source: author

Research on wartime governance in Ukraine shows that many local governments moved rapidly from ad hoc coordination to more structured collaboration mechanisms with civil society, for example: joint crisis centres for evacuation and shelter management; shared information channels on humanitarian needs; and co-designed systems for identifying and assisting vulnerable populations (Danylenko, Zagorodsky, 2025).

These network-based arrangements improved preparedness, resource-sharing and local legitimacy. They also acted as a democratic buffer under martial law: by involving civic actors and community representatives in decision-making, they partially compensated for the temporary weakening of electoral accountability, kept channels of participation open and increased public trust in local crisis measures.

### Lesson for the EU:

Local authorities and civil society crisis response networks should be recognised and supported as central pillars of democratic resilience, not as peripheral “community engagement” tools. In Ukraine-related programming (Ukraine Plan, recovery, cohesion-type instruments) and in the wider enlargement context, EU support should:

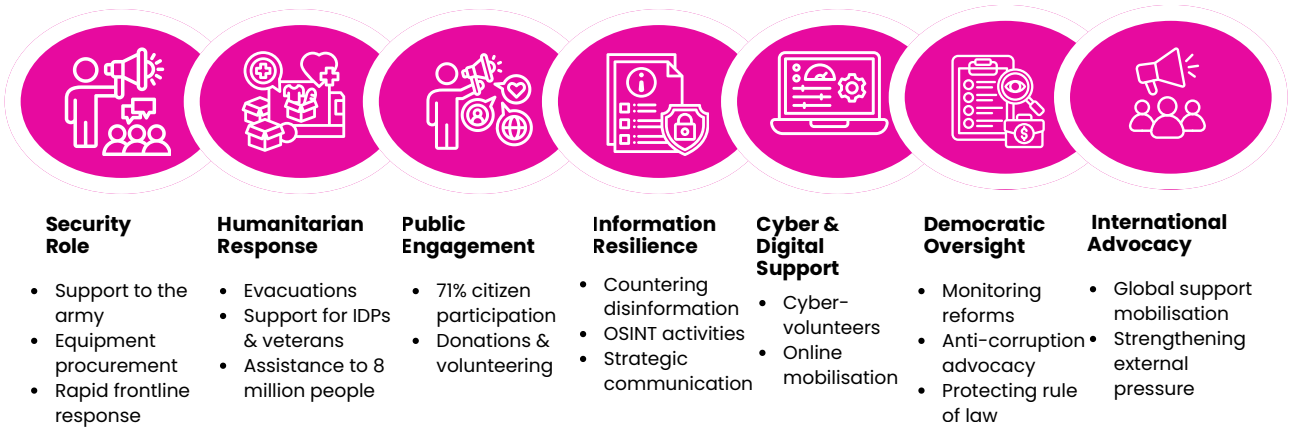
- prioritise joint projects where municipalities and CSOs co-design crisis-response, social services and local recovery;
- fund local coordination platforms (data-sharing, joint situation rooms, participatory needs assessments) rather than only isolated NGO or municipal projects;
- treat these networks as entry points for piloting participatory and inclusive governance models that can later be codified in law and administrative practice.

## Civil Society as a Security and Democracy Actor

In Ukraine, civil society is now a de facto security-relevant actor. Around 71% of citizens have participated in volunteering for the army or war-affected civilians since February 2022, via donations, in-kind support or direct engagement (Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 2025). Foundations such as Come Back Alive and the Serhiy Prytula Foundation procure equipment, including dual-use and lethal items, and often respond faster and more innovatively to frontline needs than state systems (Chmut, 2025). Volunteer and CSO networks lead evacuations, support IDPs, veterans and the wounded, and provide assistance to nearly 8 million people in 2024 only (OCHA, 2025).

## Civil Society as a Security and Democracy Actor

Civil Society (CSOs & Volunteers)



Source: author

At the same time, civil-society actors remain central to Ukraine's information resilience and democratic oversight. Since 2014, they have built strong ecosystems to debunk disinformation, conduct OSINT, mobilise cyber-volunteers and amplify authentic Ukrainian narratives. After 2022, these efforts intensified and became a core element of the country's strategic communications and information defence. CSOs continue to monitor rule-of-law and anti-corruption reforms, challenge attempts to weaken independent institutions, and use international advocacy to reinforce domestic checks when institutions are under stress.

### Lesson for the EU:

Civil society should be systematically integrated into security, resilience, cyber and information-policy dialogues with Ukraine, not confined to "democracy" chapters. Within accession negotiations and the Ukraine Plan, CSOs should be treated as co-designers and monitors of reforms in justice, anti-corruption, security-sector governance and recovery.

## Avoiding Over-Reliance and Turning Substitution into Reform

Ukrainian experience also exposes a risk relevant for EU policy: when civil society outperforms state institutions in service delivery, authorities may become dependent on volunteers rather than reforming public systems (Yurchuk, Zaremba, 2024; Burlyuk et al., 2017). Over time, this can normalise emergency substitution, blur accountability and exhaust volunteer capacities in a protracted war.

### Lesson for the EU:

Support should deliberately convert civic "substitution" into institutional learning. EU leverage, through macro-financial assistance, sectoral budget support, enlargement benchmarks and recovery funding, can be used to ensure that successful civic practices inform state reform (e.g. logistics, digital solutions, community-based services), and that CSOs are formally involved in monitoring how these reforms are implemented.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As Ukraine's case clearly demonstrates, civil society is a strategic partner for democratic resilience, not a peripheral stakeholder. EU support should prioritise long-term civic infrastructures, rapid-response mechanisms and protection of civic space in enlargement and neighbourhood policies. Structured, resourced involvement of Ukrainian CSOs in accession, recovery and security dialogues will strengthen both Ukraine's democracy and the EU's own resilience agenda.

Building up its own preparedness system, European Union should leverage Ukraine's experience and translate it into internal practices and policies:

## **From Civil-Military to Whole-of-Society Approach:**

Rethink the traditional NATO-style civil-military cooperation model focused on military support, and promote interagency, multi-level and whole-of-society approaches in which civil protection, local authorities, CSOs, business and media are treated as integral security actors, not auxiliaries.

## **Strengthening Domestic Support for Societal Resilience:**

Secure domestic political and financial support in EU member states for civil-society initiatives that build community-level preparedness (first aid, mutual aid networks, local risk awareness), so that Ukraine-inspired models of societal resilience are internalised inside the Union, not only exported.

## **Ensuring Checks and Balances in Crisis Governance:**

In supporting Ukraine and shaping the EU's own crisis systems, ensure that emergency coordination mechanisms include checks and balances: parliamentary oversight, independent media access and formal roles for civil-society actors to help minimise political tensions and prevent abuse of emergency powers.

## **Developing Practical Crisis Preparedness Guidelines:**

Encourage and support the preparation of step-by-step guidance for local authorities, private sector, NGOs and citizens on different crisis scenarios - including temporary occupation - covering personal security and survival basics, and, where appropriate, basic military training frameworks for reservists and volunteers.

## **Advancing Joint Crisis Simulation and Coordination:**

Promote regular national and cross-border simulation exercises that explicitly include local authorities, CSOs, businesses and communities, in order to identify coordination gaps, legal bottlenecks and communication failures in a whole-of-society response to aggression or large-scale crises.

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