

Civil society in Ukraine: still saving democracy

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Ukraine saw a huge explosion of popular mobilization during the Euromaidan protests in winter 2013-2014, when **twenty percent** of Ukrainians took part in the movement by either protesting or



The number of Ukrainians **donating money and volunteering** has increased. Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the armed conflict in the east have played a major role in this spike: a lion's share of donations are to **support Ukraine's armed forces**. Numerous volunteer groups have emerged to support Ukrainian servicemen and the conflict-affected population.

Public trust in civil society organisations, specifically in volunteer groups, has **grown**. Coalitions of experts from non-governmental sector have been vital in pushing reforms in public administration and judiciary, including governance transparency and accountability, decentralization and the fight against corruption.

Despite these important achievements, Ukraine's civil society still faces many challenges. Increased public trust in civil society organisations has not led to a sustainable rise in participation: only **7 percent** of citizens take part in their activities. Civil society is flourishing in Kyiv and big cities, but it is far less organised and resourceful in towns and rural areas.

corrupt schemes. The post-Euromaidan solidarity and coalition-building spirit have thus withered, partly due to unhealthy competition for the little funding there is.

More worryingly still, civic space is shrinking. In spite of the fact that Ukraine's government praises democracy and Europe, it has moved to put civil society under control. First, the government obliged anti-corruption activists to **declare their assets**(<http://euromaidanpress.com/2018/04/11/anti-corruption-activists-in-ukraine-forced-to-declare-assets-after-year-of-empty-promises/>) by a law that has been widely criticised by civic groups and international democracy watchdogs such as the **Venice Commission** and **the OSCE** for discriminatory provisions and interference with the freedom of association and the right to privacy.

The move is seen as an act of revenge to groups who pushed hard for anti-corruption reforms and asset declarations for public officials. Facing criticism from all sides, the government **proposed**(<http://khpg.org/en/index.php?id=1499727117>) (but has not approved yet) legislative amendments that are to expand control mechanism to all civil society groups that receive foreign funding – potentially changing the situation from bad to worse.

Second, activists fighting against corruption and vested interests are at particular risk as they face violent (sometimes deadly) **attacks**, threats and smear campaigns. The perpetrators of violent attacks all too often remain **unpunished**. In parallel, "uncivil" society is also on the rise. Radical **far-right civic groups** promote intolerance and use violence against LGBT, ethnic minority, feminist and left-wing activists.

Whereas their links to the state remain obscure, they tend to enjoy impunity for such attacks, which in turn creates a fertile ground for new attacks. As Ukraine faces presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019, one wonders whether the government will move to further obstruct civic space in Ukraine in order to silence dissenting voices.

As grim as it may seem, there have been fundamental changes to the tissue of society at large and to the quality and extent of civic activism in Ukraine. Even though the intensity of citizen participation and civic activism has certainly lowered in comparison to the immediate aftermath of the Euromaidan, civil society is much more robust and resilient today than it was before. It has evolved in its relationship with the state, being a more active change-maker than ever.

It has also evolved in its internal fabric, with civic activism spreading to new terrains (for example, churches and professional communities of mediators) and relying ever more on horizontal, non-hierarchical organizational forms and social media and other Internet communication platforms.

Although it may appear too slow, the transformation in and of Ukraine's civil society goes deep and is irreversible. This renders impossible a fall-back to a democratic backlash Ukraine had experienced before the Euromaidan and, in case of a trigger, Ukrainians will be quick to mobilize again.

The empowering effect of the experience of participation and activism among Ukrainians, however spontaneous and short-lived, should not be underestimated. Ukraine's civil society has come out as a winner in more than one democratic revolution. Since the Euromaidan, it has proved capable of pushing for evolutionary changes that will eventually bring about democratic consolidation.

Society in post-Euromaidan Ukraine: From Revolution to Consolidation, co-edited by Natalia Shapovalova and Olga Burlyuk (Ibidem Press with Columbia University Press, 2018).

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