



THEMATIC REPORT

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE

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*) Correction is due to change of distribution status, text remains the unchanged

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Introduction

This report aims at providing a preliminary overview on civil society dynamics and activities in relation to the Ukrainian crisis. For the purpose of this report, civil society is considered as a social space outside governmental, business-oriented and family relationships and activities, where individuals voluntarily engage in forms of public participation and action around shared interests, purposes or values.¹

Between October and November 2014 the SMM conducted interviews with approximately 260 civil society organizations (CSOs) across Ukraine to gather information on their activities and their views on confidence-building, conflict resolution, dialogue and reconciliation opportunities. Each of the 10 field teams across the country selected around 20-30 CSOs which were active, and/or registered, in their respective areas of responsibility as well as representatives of different self-organized initiatives or volunteer organizations created during/or in the aftermath of Maidan events.

In their interaction with CSOs, the SMM field teams used a questionnaire focusing on: general information related to the activities of a specific organization; its work/involvement related to the crisis in the east; assessments on conflict resolution, dialogue and reconciliations possibilities; perception and role in reform processes. During the interviews the interlocutors were also asked for their views and suggestions on how the SMM and the international community can best support Ukraine to overcome the current crisis and carry out reforms.

Main findings

The SMM findings highlighted that whilst the current key focus for many civil society representatives is the alleviation of the impact of conflict, such as providing assistance to IDPs, as well as Ukrainian servicemen and their families, there is clearly momentum to support civil society's engagement on conflict resolution/transformation and reform processes.

Women's organizations interviewed were particularly interested in engaging in dialogue processes, including through establishing contacts between people from western and eastern Ukraine and in re-establishing former relations with women's groups in the Russian Federation.

The gender balance amongst the CSOs interviewed by the SMM was relatively good. Organizations working on IDP support, psychological assistance and charity are often run by women, while those focused on business or legal aid appear to have stronger male membership and management.

¹ This definition is consistent with the definition given in the 2011 [report](#) of the OSCE Project Co-ordinator on national practices on confidence-building measures between the state and civil society.

The SMM is seen to be a provider of accurate, detailed and impartial information that can counter what is referred to as propaganda. The CSOs interviewed urged the SMM to enhance its capacity in monitoring and reporting, and to become more actively involved in conflict resolution and dialogue efforts.

CSOs hope that the international community will support conflict resolution, dialogue and the reform processes through capacity-building. This can be achieved by bringing best practices from other countries, and through applying pressure on parties to the conflict and State actors to resolve Ukraine's current crisis.

I. Background: an overview of CSOs in Ukraine

According to the State Registry Service of Ukraine there were over 50,850 registered CSOs in Ukraine in July 2013. Information received by the SMM from regional authorities in late 2014 shows that the number of registered CSOs per region varied between around 200 in Ivano-Frankivsk to 5,000 in Odessa. They carry out a wide range of activities reaching from sports, business and youth associations, veteran organizations, cultural and minority groups to charity organizations, human rights and women's rights organizations, and organizations advocating for political reforms. Typically, however, only a limited number of registered CSOs are active whilst many are dormant. Additionally, the SMM came across several civil society groups that carry out their civic activities on a voluntary basis without formal registration.² Many stakeholders also do not see the advantage of being institutionalized as a formal organisation, some of them evoking the possibility of negative repercussion or retaliation in the future as, for instance, indicated by one CSO in Kharkiv.

Since the events on Maidan during the winter of 2013-2014, followed by the annexation of Crimea into the Russian Federation, the upsurge in separatist movements in the East of the country and the subsequent launch of the anti-terrorism operation (ATO), Ukraine has experienced heightened civic activism. This is also illustrated by three phenomena: established organizations have redirected their previous work to focus almost exclusively on providing immediate assistance to conflict-affected people; new CSOs have been established across the country, including self-citizens initiatives that assumed an active role in the protection of activists and the support of Ukrainian servicemen in the east; and new organizations have been created by internally displaced persons (IDPs) to work on the defence of their rights. Illustratively, amongst the new CSOs met by the SMM there were also two organizations established by internally displaced Crimean Tatars who endeavour to maintain their cultural identity in areas of displacement.

² The Law of Ukraine on Civic Associations No. 4572-VI in 2012 sets out principle regulations on the freedom of association, and stipulates the registration of civic associations through the State Registry Service of Ukraine.

In addition to those dynamics, some organizations have temporarily stopped their activities altogether, as they perceive that engaging in, for example, cultural activities when the country is in a crisis, would not be appropriate. The post-Maidan generation of CSOs is therefore particularly focused on work related to the conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine.

The CSOs interviewed by the SMM vary both in terms of size and membership. While some organizations have less than ten members, others have well over one hundred members. In only a small number of mass organizations the membership reaches several thousand people. They rarely have any paid personnel, being run wholly by volunteers. The main funding sources for CSOs are membership fees and private donations. Lack of funding was mentioned during interviews as a key challenge to activities. Only a few organizations have received public funding; these include veteran organizations, youth and sports clubs, trade unions, and organizations working in the field of public health or with persons with disabilities. Religious organizations may receive funds from churches, and minority organizations from the embassies of kin-states. Some organizations were implementing projects for international organizations, or had received funding from international organizations or donors. The main donors for Ukraine's CSOs are USAID, EU, UNDP and the Open Society Foundation.³ Respondents emphasized that Ukraine's current legislation on taxation makes it difficult for CSOs to receive foreign funding.⁴

In addition to insufficient funding the CSOs pointed out that lack of co-ordination was a problem for their work. This lack of co-ordination amongst CSOs and between CSOs and State authorities for example, in preparing and providing assistance to IDPs and Ukraine's forces fighting in the east was believed to lead to inefficiencies and duplication of assistance. Furthermore, the CSOs found it difficult to participate in the decision-making processes of regional authorities. Only very few organizations interviewed were participating in, or even mentioned, the 'civic councils,' whose function is to enable civil society to participate in regional decision-making

II. Crisis-related work

This assessment again confirms that volunteers through CSOs are very much involved in, and committed to, work on conflict-related issues in Ukraine. A majority of CSOs that participated in the assessment said that their key activity was to provide humanitarian assistance to IDPs. Illustratively, 21 out of 29 interviewed CSOs in

³ [USAID](#) has several programs for civil society support in Ukraine; in autumn 2014 [EU](#) launched a 10 million euros program to support civil society efforts in the field of democratisation and reforms; and [UNDP](#) supports CSOs in the field of democratisation and participatory decision-making. The [OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine](#) has published an analytical guidebook on the funding opportunities and challenges of civil society in Ukraine.

⁴ For additional information on this particular issue, see the 2011 OSCE Project Co-ordinator report on national practices on confidence-building measures between the state and civil society.

Kharkiv oblast indicated to be involved in IDPs assistance. These CSOs help IDPs in various ways: through finding accommodation, by providing clothes and food or household items, assisting IDPs to get access to social or medical services and legal aid, or by providing psychological assistance to traumatised individuals. Organizations representing minorities target assistance to conflict-affected families amongst their own minority groups.

Another main beneficiary group of volunteer assistance are Ukrainian military units and volunteer battalions fighting in the conflict zone, as well as the families of servicemen back home. Up to one quarter of CSOs that were covered in this assessment raise funds to support military activities, and collect and transport food and warm clothes regularly to military personnel serving on the frontline. Families whose breadwinners have been mobilised receive humanitarian assistance from some organisations. Wounded soldiers are also being supported by civil society groups that help them to get access to medical and psychological treatments, some in close co-operation with public and military hospitals. For example, an organization in Ivano-Frankivsk region is arranging prostheses to soldiers that have lost limbs in the fighting. Most legal aid organizations in Lviv region are now offering their services to soldiers and their families.

Only a small number of CSOs were involved in conflict resolution, reconciliation and dialogue activities. These will be discussed in detail in the following section of this report.

A number of organizations informed the SMM that they had put aside their regular activities as conflict-related work was perceived to be more urgent. This may have a serious effect on the situation of vulnerable groups that used to benefit from CSO projects. An organization that usually supports individuals with HIV/AIDS told the SMM that they are now providing assistance to IDPs. Other organizations have shelved their human rights or gender equality projects in order to help conflict-affected groups. While the regular work of these organizations and their current conflict-related activities are not necessarily contradictory and could be consolidated, the constraints in funding and human resources may push CSOs to make painful choices between target groups.

This concern echoes the criticism brought up by almost all CSOs regarding the gaps in State response to various conflict-inflicted needs, including in providing support to soldiers (e.g. delivering food, equipment, medicine, etc.) and life-saving assistance to conflict-affected people. In this respect, the State's response to the conflict was considered deemed unsatisfactory. State authorities were seen not to carry out their protection responsibilities in a sufficient manner, resulting in civil society taking over tasks from the State authorities. The Government's failure to provide assistance to IDPs was underlined by many interviewees. Respondents also stated that the IDP law that was only passed in October 2014 does not guarantee sufficient support to IDPs.

Some civil society actors stressed that they worked together with regional government departments, and that their criticism was directed more at the central level.

CSOs assessed their own role in responding to the conflict as very significant and even crucial, but they noted that there was space for improvement. As mentioned above, they wanted to have more co-ordination both amongst civil society actors working on the conflict, as well as between civil society and State actors. At the same time, as CSOs in Chernivtsi pointed out, conflict response had created opportunities for civil society to establish contacts with regional authorities. CSOs in Odessa emphasised that responding to the humanitarian needs caused by the crisis had encouraged co-operation amongst groups despite their differing ideological views. Some western Ukrainian organizations were keen to develop co-operation with CSOs in the eastern part of the country, which is still limited. Negative stereotypes of other regions, upheld by distorted media coverage of conflict and what is referred to as propaganda, were acknowledged by interlocutors in both Lviv and Luhansk as a factor that hindered co-operation. An organization in Odessa region claimed that they had had to stop their activities in the east due to death threats.

III. Conflict Resolution and Dialogue

In comparison to conflict relief work far fewer of the CSOs interviewed work on issues related to conflict resolution or dialogue. In most regions less than ten per cent of CSOs were involved, or planned to become involved, in conflict resolution or dialogue. The organizations that are working in this field are located mostly in the urban areas of Kyiv, Lviv and Kharkiv.

The reason for a low level of engagement is not a lack of interest, as most CSOs considered dialogue and conflict resolution efforts to be very important. The only exception appears to be in the retaken localities (Kramatorsk) of the northern part of the Donetsk region where a majority of respondents saw the concepts of conflict resolution and dialogue in a negative light. They saw no role for civil society in such processes, unless dialogue is intended among Ukrainian citizens (of different allegiance) living in Government-controlled territory. CSOs in other areas close to the frontline in the southern part of the Donetsk region and in the Luhansk region did not share these negative views, and some CSOs in these areas were directly involved in local dialogue efforts. Only a small number of respondents thought that the best way to end the conflict was through military means without dialogue efforts.

In general, the respondents thought that conflict resolution and dialogue efforts should be carried out at different levels. At the highest level there should be talks between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, which according to some should also involve the EU and the United States of America. Some CSOs believed that the Government of Ukraine should undertake direct talks with the armed groups in eastern Ukraine, while others rejected the idea that the Government could involve itself in a dialogue with

‘terrorist organizations.’ Inter-regional dialogue aimed at countering cultural stereotypes by providing truthful information was seen as necessary. Lastly, civil society actors believed that local dialogue and reconciliation efforts were needed at community level to reduce tensions and build unity. Suggested participants in local dialogue efforts were IDPs and host communities, different ethnic groups, and those with differing political ideologies.

The interviewed CSOs were also asked to assess processes related to the Minsk documents. Most respondents believed these documents had so far failed to bring any results, as could be seen from continuing fighting despite the ceasefire agreement. The main reasons for the failure were perceived to be lack of commitment from the sides, and insufficient contacts amongst the conflict actors. Despite the lack of success, the predominant opinion amongst respondents was that high-level conflict resolution efforts such as the Minsk talks should be upheld, and that intensified efforts should be carried out to foster inclusive dialogue at all levels (community, local and inter-regional levels), creating spaces also for views of civil society representatives, including at the grass-roots levels. The CSOs urged the OSCE to intensify its efforts to maintain and strengthen the Minsk talks. They also hoped that other international actors, including the EU and the UN, would enhance their efforts in this field.

CSOs’ own contributions to dialogue efforts were seen to lie at inter-regional and local levels. In Odessa, Kyiv and Kharkiv, civil society groups organize roundtable discussions and dialogue that bring pro and anti-Maidan groups together. The best known examples of these efforts are the Odessa Dialogue process since the May 2 incident, and Dignity Space-facilitated dialogue between pro-Maidan activists and former Berkut officers in Kyiv. Organizations in these regions that already have experiences of local dialogue processes had most confidence in local and regional-level processes of reconciliation and dialogue. Some CSOs said that their humanitarian aid projects included dialogue. For example, organizations from Lviv and Kharkiv providing assistance to IDPs pointed out that they gave aid to all in need, irrespective of political opinions and that this work offered “conducive humanisation of relationships” representing concrete opportunities for dialogue.

Many CSOs appear to have ideas or plans to engage in dialogue with people in the eastern regions or in the Russian Federation. In Luhansk, a youth group wanted to organise social events to counteract community division. Women’s organizations were particularly interested in exploring opportunities to engage in dialogue processes. A women’s organization in Dnepropetrovsk wanted to re-establish its former contacts with Russian women’s groups and mothers of soldiers in particular. Women’s organizations in Ivano-Frankivsk were keen to establish contact with people living in the eastern part of the country in order to share information on their experiences.

Biased media coverage and what is referred to as propaganda were brought up by many organizations as major obstacles for conflict resolution and dialogue. It is here that most CSOs saw the OSCE's and more specifically, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission's contribution as necessary. The OSCE's main role was seen as the provider of reliable and impartial monitoring and information on conflict in the east. Some respondents said that the SMM was already largely doing this, whilst others criticised the SMM's current performance and said that the mission should improve its monitoring and reporting. More accurate and detailed reporting was requested from the mission, with the SMM reports being made directly available to the public in Ukraine. The SMM was also expected to make its work more visible to the public, and to reach out to the local population and media.

Even those who were critical of the SMM's performance stressed that the OSCE's, and specifically the SMM's, presence in Ukraine was important. The OSCE was also expected to take up a more active role in conflict resolution, and for example take a stronger lead in mediation and facilitate dialogue across the contact line. The OSCE was perceived to have capacity to do this because it had contacts with all parties to the conflict. Respondents also expressed their hope that the SMM would collaborate more with civil society groups, help them to establish inter-regional contacts and enhance their capacity in the field of conflict resolution and dialogue.

In addition to the OSCE, respondents hoped that international organizations more generally will engage more in building the conflict resolution capacity of civil society in Ukraine. Capacity building should take place through training and mentoring, as well as through providing expertise to CSOs. Training needs on International Humanitarian Law was specifically mentioned. Financial support is also needed. One issue raised repeatedly in the interviews was that international organizations should make information available on experiences in other countries and facilitate the sharing of best practices. Other roles that the CSOs hoped the international community would take on included monitoring the human rights situation and providing human rights education, holding State authorities accountable, organizing training on European values, and providing humanitarian aid.

IV. Ukrainian reforms

There are clearly fewer CSOs that are currently directly involved in reform processes than in relief activities, not unlike the situation concerning dialogue and conflict resolution activities. While some organisations indicated that fear of intimidations by authorities or limited capacity to influence decisions-makers might be explaining factors, others emphasise the necessity for the State to assume a leading role in the humanitarian response allowing them to get actively involved into reconciliation and reforms process. A few organizations had no plans to engage in reform processes as they drew a clear line between their own humanitarian work and the political processes of reforms. Nevertheless, many believed reforms to be important and

aspired to engage in this area at a later stage. While reforms, such as decentralisation, lustration and anti-corruption, were considered necessary and important some respondents across the country had nonetheless little confidence that reform processes would bring about genuine change in Ukraine. CSOs both in Mariupol and Ivano-Frankivsk pointed out that for successful reforms it would be necessary to change the mindset of people as passive beneficiaries of social benefits that has been inherited from Soviet times.

The areas that CSOs are currently working on include decentralisation, lustration, anti-corruption, legal reforms, electoral process, and participatory decision-making. Civil society's roles in the reform process were seen to be manifold: CSOs were seen to be initiators of reforms; they should put pressure on public institutions to implement reforms; monitor implementation; and inform the public about them. Opinions varied regarding how difficult or easy it was for CSOs to get involved in the reform processes; some organizations said that regional governments were welcoming civil society involvement while others complained that the processes lack transparency and that the CSOs' efforts to participate were ignored by public institutions.

The international community was urged to actively support the reform processes in Ukraine by providing training, highlighting best practices from other countries and European experiences in particular, putting pressure on the new Government of Ukraine to carry out genuine reforms, providing funding for civil society's projects related to reforms, and through monitoring Ukraine's reforms.

V. Concluding remarks

On the basis of information collected by the SMM field teams, it is clear that since the Maidan events, that civil society has to play a major role in the framework of the crises, notably in providing direct assistance to the conflict-affected people. At the same time, it is also inevitable that individuals and communities, who are divisively affected by the conflict, developed opposing opinions about trigger factors and possible solutions for the current situation, including the perception on the SMM's role as well as its added value.

The increased activism of the Ukrainian civil society representatives is a clear opportunity for the OSCE and other international partners to support their participation in dialogue processes at different levels, including but not limited to the community and local levels. In the framework of its mandate, there is a concrete momentum for the SMM to play an active role in accompanying the communication process between parties with the objective to contribute in diffusing tensions, (e.g. between IDPs and hosting communities), but also to facilitate civil society participation in the public debate and in decision making processes (e.g. reforms).

Accessing reliable and timely information was stressed several times by interlocutors as a key factor for the peace process, particularly in a context where media are considered as a contributing factor to fuelling the conflict. Despite some expressed difficulties in understanding the added value of the SMM with regard to the current situation, the mission was largely recognized as a provider of objective and reliable information. The SMM mandate and role on monitoring and reporting the situation in the country, including violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, play an invaluable role in guaranteeing access to impartial, verified and accurate information