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UKRAINE REPORT

Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space (2023-2026): Final Summary Report

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Contents

Key Findings

Between 2023 and 2026, local democracy in Ukraine transitioned from mass emergency mobilisation to a state of institutional survival. This shift is marked by acute democratic fatigue and a critical personnel crisis as civic leaders mobilise into the Armed Forces. Activists now bear a dual burden of managing community recovery while struggling for their own economic survival, a dynamic that has narrowed the active civic core and made local resilience dangerously person-dependent rather than institutionalised.

A profound democratic asymmetry has emerged between rear and frontline hromadas, with high-risk communities facing rapid depopulation and institutional hollowing. In these zones, civic actors have moved into substitute governance, performing essential state functions while formal power has centralised within military administrations. This has created a widening openness gap, where security concerns are used as a blanket justification to restrict transparency in reconstruction and budgeting, effectively siphoning off democratic agency from the local level.

To sustain resilience, Ukraine must transition to a polycentric governance model that distributes authority across multiple autonomous nodes, leveraging local knowledge to maintain functionality under stress. International donors must recalibrate their strategies by shifting away from standardised external schemes toward direct, multi-year investments in locally rooted civic nodes. Strengthening these horizontal linkages is essential for transforming the wartime surge of civic energy into durable, accountable democratic institutions.

This shift towards polycentric governance should be seen as a natural evolution of wartime civicness, not as a separate external model. What appeared in 2022-2023 as dispersed, largely informal interactions among volunteers and local officials requires formal institutionalization by 2026 through predictable procedures and horizontal platforms. In this sense, polycentric governance emerges as an empirically driven response to the person-dependent resilience and leadership burnout observed across the study's longitudinal waves.

Recommendations for International Donors

The evidence presented in this report underscores that sustaining democratic resilience in Ukraine, particularly in frontline hromadas, requires a recalibration of donor strategies. Wartime civic mobilisation generated unprecedented levels of participation, new NGOs, and dense volunteer networks, especially in regions exposed to direct violence and displacement. Yet these same regions now face the most severe socio-economic pressures, fiscal fragility, and security risks, which increasingly force civic actors to withdraw from public engagement in order to secure basic livelihoods. Without targeted intervention, this dynamic risks transforming the frontline hromadas from sites of democratic innovation into zones of institutional hollowing.

To mitigate this risk, donors should prioritise context-sensitive support for civicness in frontline regions as a strategic investment in Ukraine's democratic future.

- First, donors should recognise civicness in frontline hromadas as a strategic governance asset, not merely as a temporary humanitarian resource. Wartime volunteer networks and newly formed NGOs have functioned as critical nodes within Ukraine's polycentric governance system, mobilizing local resources, transmitting contextual knowledge, and enabling rapid experimentation. However, as documented throughout this report, these actors are now disproportionately affected by economic precarity and personal security risks. Without targeted support, the erosion of civic capacity in frontline regions threatens to weaken the entire polycentric architecture, producing asymmetric democratic resilience across territories.

- Second, donor strategies should prioritise direct support to local actors and reduce reliance on extractive development intermediaries. Interview data and field observations indicate that a growing share of resources is absorbed by large development agencies whose high administrative costs, salary structures, and standardised programming models limit their responsiveness to local contexts. In some cases, these intermediaries function as gatekeepers rather than enablers, crowding out grassroots initiatives and reproducing governance templates developed in fundamentally different regions without sufficient adaptation. Such dynamics are particularly damaging in frontline hromadas, where civic ecosystems are fragile and where externally imposed schemes can displace locally evolved solutions.

- Third, donor programming should move from standardised, project-based support toward place-sensitive, multi-year investments that stabilise local civic capacities. Supporting polycentric governance requires enabling civic actors to remain embedded locally, rather than extracting them into short-term consultative roles within externally managed programmes. This includes flexible funding that allows organisations to cover core costs, retain local staff, and adapt activities to rapidly changing security and socio-economic conditions. Such flexibility is essential if local knowledge is to be systematically integrated into decision-making rather than remaining informal and episodic.

- Fourth, donors should explicitly design interventions that strengthen horizontal linkages, not only vertical accountability. For polycentric governance to be realised dense networks between hromadas, civic organisations, professional communities, and local self-government bodies have to be sustained. Donor support for inter-municipal cooperation, peer-to-peer learning platforms, and cross-regional civic networks – especially those connecting frontline and rear hromadas – can help transform collaborative partnerships into durable mechanisms of shared learning and institutional memory. This is particularly important given the report's finding that facilitation of local knowledge remains weaker than other polycentric mechanisms.

- Finally, investing in polycentric governance means resisting the temptation to substitute for local actors in the name of efficiency. While large-scale programmes play an important role, democratic resilience in Ukraine ultimately depends on distributed governance capacity rather than centralised delivery. Donor strategies that prioritise locally rooted experimentation, co-production, and institutional learning are more likely to prevent burnout, reduce elite capture, and broaden participation beyond closed circles.

- Ultimately, supporting recovery that is both effective and democratically resilient requires recognizing frontline hromadas not merely as vulnerable territories, but as critical laboratories of governance under extreme conditions. Donor strategies that invest in locally embedded civic ecosystems – rather than substituting for them – will be essential for ensuring that the extraordinary wartime surge of civic engagement translates into durable democratic institutions in post-war Ukraine.

Introduction

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, local democratic practices have operated under conditions of prolonged uncertainty, institutional strain, and security constraints. While military developments and national-level governance naturally command immediate public attention, the nuanced, day-to-day functioning of democracy at the hromada level remains an important subject for detailed study. Although the resilience of Ukrainian local governance has been widely recognised in academic and policy discourse, there is a continued need for systematic, longitudinal evidence that tracks how this democratic space is adapting in the context of prolonged war. It is at this level that citizens interact with authorities, civic initiatives emerge, and decisions affecting daily life, security, and recovery are negotiated.

This report contributes to addressing this gap by examining how democratic space at the local level in Ukraine has evolved between 2023 and 2026. It draws on a unique three-wave longitudinal study of a key respondents network conducted during 2023-2026 by the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) in partnership with the London School of Economics (LSE) within the framework of PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform. In line with PeaceRep's broader remit for evidence-based conflict research the aim of the project was to study the interactions at the local level in order to strengthen democratic resilience, local democracy, and the early recovery process in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion.

The concept of democratic space used in this report goes beyond formal institutional arrangements. It refers to the broader ecosystem of civic participation, trust, accountability, inclusion, and interaction between citizens, civil society actors, and local authorities. In wartime Ukraine, this space has been shaped not only by legal and institutional changes under martial law, but also by security conditions, economic pressures, population displacement, and the growing role of informal and volunteer-based practices. Understanding democratic space therefore requires an integrated perspective that connects governance, civicness, security, and economic wellbeing.

This work applies and develops the concept of "civicness" as it has been utilised in broader conflict research (see Kaldor and Radice 2022) and in application to the Ukrainian case (Cooper et al forthcoming). The concept of civicness was developed out of a frustration with the idea of civil society applied within conflict-affected settings, due to its strong association with NGOs and other such organisational entities. Researchers working within PeaceRep, as well as previous related related research projects including the Conflict Research Programme, developed the idea of civicness to capture the multiplicity of activity, from individual behaviours and informal networks as well as NGOs and other such self-identifying civic groups, present in conflict settings that enable communities to endure even in the most difficult of circumstances.

We define civicness to capture the range of activities and social relations individuals enter into that generate an implicit social contract, or set of obligations towards others, and makes possible the development through these relations of public goods. Civicness has a particular importance in Ukraine where researchers have long noted, especially in the post-Maidan (2013-2014) period, strong civic networks and a "do-it-yourself" culture (Channell-Justice 2022, see also Krapfl & Kühn von Burgsdorff 2023) marked by a high sense of interpersonal trust towards fellow citizens that contrast with public scepticism and hostility towards state institutions (Artiukh and Fedirko 2025). Many remarked at the outset of the war the upsurge in popular mobilisation (what we referred to in a previous PeaceRep report for the present project as "the rally around the flag" stage). This environment shaped the design of the present project. We set out to identify experts within the individual localities who, through broadly defined activism, had accumulated specialist insights, which combined offered a rich body of new knowledge.

Critically, wartime civicness does more than energise democratic space – it builds distributed capacity to perform basic governance functions at the community level. Therefore, this report treats civicness as the empirical substrate for a shift to polycentric governance: a system of multiple, partially autonomous decision centres capable of interacting and learning within a shared institutional framework. We trace how broad-based mobilisation in 2023 transitions to a phase of 'institutional survival' by 2026, positioning polycentricity as the overarching analytical framework that links the report's empirical findings to the challenge of building durable mechanisms of participation.

Methodology and Research Trajectory

The study's empirical backbone is a three-wave longitudinal panel of 120 local activists in 40 hromadas, repeatedly surveyed to capture granular change over time. This primary dataset is supplemented by qualitative interviews, focus groups, and a targeted January 2026 snapshot to explain causal mechanisms and regional variations. While national surveys and external data are referenced for contextual triangulation, they do not substitute for the report's core empirical base. The unique value of this civic network research lies in its ability to track how specific local "nodes" of the polycentric system adapt to prolonged conflict, moving beyond the broad participation rates provided by national-level statistics.

The key respondents network was established through a structured and transparent sampling strategy. The team randomly selected 40 hromadas (municipalities, the basic administrative level in Ukraine), stratified by population size and settlement type (cities, urban-type settlements, and villages). Within each hromada, an initial pool of potential participants was identified, consisting of local researchers, activists, and volunteers. Selection criteria required at least three years of residence in the hromada prior to the full-scale invasion and sustained experience of civic or volunteer engagement since its onset. From each local pool, three key informants were selected to ensure diversity by gender, age, and type of civic experience, resulting in a core network of 120 informants.

By building a local network comprised of community activists (broadly defined), we aimed to draw on their unique knowledge bases of their community to build a holistic picture of some of the challenges present at the local level. This was an application in Ukraine of what PeaceRep has come to call "Civic Network Research", and the team benefited from discussions with the LSE Syria team in the research design phase, as well as feedback on the publication of the first report from the project. The civic network was sustained across three survey waves (2023-2025), with a limited degree of respondent replacement necessitated by wartime displacement, loss of contact, or deaths.

The chronological evolution of the study reveals a distinct trajectory of local democracy from survival to institutional endurance. The first wave, conducted between March and August 2023, established a baseline picture of local democratic space during the second year of the full-scale war. It documented a period defined by mass emergency mobilisation, informal cooperation, and horizontal volunteer networks.

As the full-scale invasion transitioned into a prolonged phase, the second wave (October-December 2023) captured early signs of stabilisation alongside growing frustration with limited transparency and the unequal pace of economic recovery. The third wave, conducted in early 2025, identifies a critical shift toward professionalisation and selectivity. It highlights the emergence of 'democratic fatigue,' the narrowing of the active civic core, and the tension between technocratic recovery planning and inclusive decision-making.

Qualitative components are integrated into the panel design as an analytic "upscaling." Interviews and focus groups serve to: (a) refine causal explanations for shifts recorded in the 2023-2025 panel waves, and (b) verify how civicness configurations play out under different security conditions. The January 2026 qualitative snapshot provides a targeted update on the trajectory, enabling an assessment of how factors like the energy crisis and donor withdrawal alter local democracy. Thus, the qualitative data do not replace the 120-person panel but elucidate its patterns and strengthen the interpretation of polycentric processes as a response to the fragility of person-dependent resilience.

The in-depth interviews and focus groups add a further, regionally differentiated layer to this diagnosis by revealing a particularly acute vulnerability in frontline hromadas. These are precisely the localities that accumulated substantial experiential capacity after the onset of the full-scale invasion – where new waves of civicness emerged, new NGOs were created, and volunteer infrastructures became deeply embedded in everyday governance. By early 2025, however, many of these hromadas face compounding socio-economic pressures that fundamentally reshaping civic engagement. Activists increasingly report the need to prioritise personal security, stable income, and family survival, leading to the suspension or complete withdrawal from civic and watchdog activities. This dynamic poses a significant risk for the long-term institutionalisation of democratic NGOs in frontline regions, where civic capacity was built rapidly but remains fragile.

Moreover, interviewees consistently point to structural distortions in the aid and development ecosystem: large international development organisations absorb a substantial share of available resources through comparatively high salary scales, while lacking the flexibility or mandate to directly sustain regional initiatives. As a result, support is often delivered through standardised, externally designed schemes – frequently replicated from prior interventions in Africa or the Middle East – without sufficient adaptation to local wartime conditions or accumulated regional knowledge.

This misalignment not only limits the effectiveness of assistance but also risks crowding out locally rooted civic actors at the very moment when their survival is most critical for democratic resilience in frontline Ukraine.

To capture the critical dynamics of the fourth winter and surely one of the most challenging periods of the full-scale invasion, a final qualitative snapshot was conducted in January 2026. This stage involved a targeted focus group discussion with experienced activists from the core network residing in frontline and near-frontline communities of Sumy, Poltava, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, and Odesa regions.

The 2026 findings reveal a significant shift from the 'democratic fatigue' observed in 2025 to a state of 'institutional survival'. Respondents describe a reality shaped by severe energy deficits (with outages lasting up to 16 hours a day), intensifying Russian military pressure, and a deepening personnel crisis as key civic leaders mobilise into the Armed Forces. Furthermore, this period is marked by a concerning trend of 'donor withdrawal' from high-risk zones, where international support increasingly retreats to safer western or central regions, leaving frontline civil society isolated amidst escalating needs.

Structurally, this summary report reflects this analytical logic by organizing the findings around two primary dimensions of resilience. It begins by analyzing 'Internal Resilience,' focusing on the human infrastructure of local democracy, the evolution of civic actors from broad mass mobilisation to a professionalised core, and the critical challenges of emotional burnout and financial instability. It then turns to 'External Resilience,' examining the environment in which these actors operate, including perceptions of local self-government, the 'openness gap' in reconstruction governance, and the management of social tensions in a resource-scarce environment.

By grounding its analysis in the lived experiences of civic actors across multiple years of war, this report offers a nuanced account of democracy under extreme conditions. It highlights not only the remarkable adaptability of Ukrainian communities but also the structural risks of exclusion and institutional hollowing. In doing so, it aims to inform policy debates on how to support a recovery that is not only efficient but democratically resilient.

Part 1: Internal Resilience of Civic Activists

1.1. Heterogeneous Structure of Civicness: From Mass Mobilisation to Professionalisation

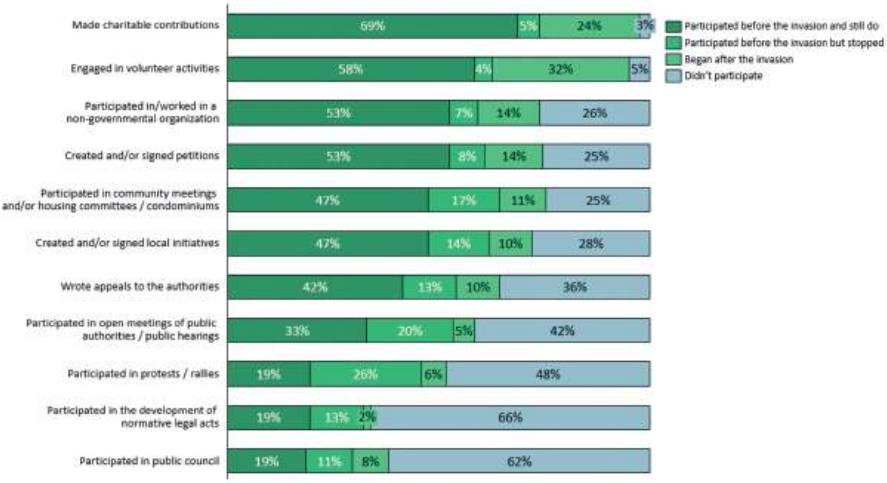
The evolution of civicness in Ukraine between 2023 and 2025 is defined by a transformation from a universal, emergency response to a more stratified, professionalised sector. The full-scale invasion triggered a profound decentralisation of civic initiatives, expanding the geography of activism far beyond Kyiv and major regional centres (Czerska-Shaw & Dunin-Wąsowicz, 2025; Czerska-Shaw & Jacoby, 2023). Unlike previous waves of civic engagement, such as the Revolution of Dignity, which were often urban-centric, the response to the 2022 invasion permeated every level of society. The unique scale of the threat compelled social groups previously removed from the third sector to engage, mobilizing immediate support for relatives, neighbours, and local defence units across the country.

Our findings stress that this decentralisation creates multiple local "nodes" of coordination that exercise influence beyond mere volunteer activity. In the three waves of our study, these nodes appear as the ability to mobilise resources, organise aid, and maintain communications even where formal procedures are weak. While these practices are not equivalent to formal governance, they establish the foundation for polycentricity by distributing functions across several autonomous actors.

To verify the scale of this shift, we compare our panel results to available national surveys. Quantitative data from national studies (e.g., Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 2024; IS NASU, 2025) corroborate the unprecedented scale of wartime mobilisation. As of August 2024, an absolute majority of Ukrainians (71%) reported having contributed to volunteer support for the army, internally displaced persons, or civilians affected by the war. This engagement took multiple forms: 34% provided financial assistance, 15% engaged in physical volunteering, and 22% combined both forms of support. Importantly, this mobilisation was socially broad, with similar levels of financial participation across age groups, while regional variation was evident: physical volunteering was most prevalent in western regions, whereas financial contributions were most common in the southern and central regions (Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 2024). By August 2025 it was a nearly identical overall participation rate (70.8%), suggesting not a collapse of civic engagement but a stabilisation at a high level under conditions of economic exhaustion (IS NASU, 2025).

Data from our key respondents surveys show the same pattern. This initial surge created a heterogeneous civic structure where humanitarian aid and military support served as universal entry points for civic life. Data from 2023 captures the magnitude of this shift, with 69% of respondents making charitable contributions and 58% directly engaging in volunteer activities. However, as the war transitioned into a protracted conflict, the structure of civicness began to change. The broad, informal 'mass' mobilisation gradually gave way to professionalisation, where sustained engagement in governance and recovery became the domain of those with specific skills, resources, or institutional roles.

Figure 1. Share of participation in various civil activities before and after the invasion (taken from Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space: Part 1, 2023).



By January 2026, qualitative evidence suggests that the trend toward professionalisation has evolved into a more problematic phase of 'civic monetisation' and institutional mimicry. Focus group participants highlight a distortion in the local civic ecosystem caused by the disparity between volunteer work and the international humanitarian sector.

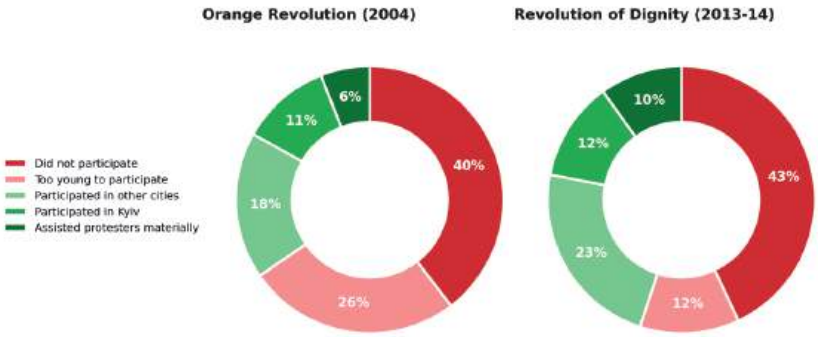
As noted, the high salaries (often cited around $1,500) offered by international NGOs that are operating in Ukraine have fundamentally altered local expectations: residents are increasingly reluctant to engage in unpaid volunteering, viewing civic activity primarily as a source of income rather than a contribution to resilience.

Furthermore, the structure of civicness is becoming cluttered with 'quasi-NGOs' (GONGOs). Activists report that local authorities and communal institutions (such as libraries or educational departments) are establishing or repurposing non-governmental organisations solely to access donor funding. One participant described this as a regression to pre-2014 practices, creating unfair competition where independent civil society is forced to compete for shrinking resources against state-affiliated entities that possess administrative leverage but lack genuine autonomy.

1.2. Previous Civic Engagement and Continuity of Participation

A critical component of internal resilience is the composition of the activist core. While the sector benefits from the experience of long-time organizers, the 2025 survey data reveals a fundamental shift in the profile of civic actors. Contrary to the assumption that civil society is driven solely by the 'old guard,' the data shows that a significant proportion of those currently active in their communities were not participants in the Revolution of Dignity (2014) or the Orange Revolution (2004).

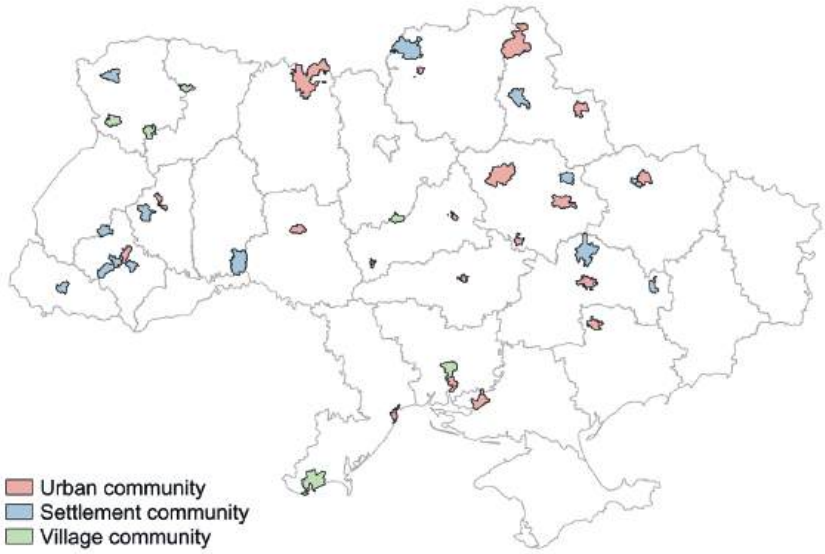
Figure 2. Previous activism experience of key informants (taken from Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space: Part 3, 2025).



This disconnect from previous historical events is largely explained by the changing geography and nature of civic engagement in wartime. Unlike the mostly centralised political protests of 2004 and 2013-14, which were concentrated in Kyiv and major urban hubs, the response to the full-scale invasion required immediate, decentralised action even in small towns and villages.

The 2025 analysis highlights that civic initiatives have expanded beyond just Kyiv or urban hromadas, activating residents in rural and smaller communities who previously felt removed from national-level activism. For these respondents, the motivation was not political identity (as in the Revolution of Dignity), but the physical survival of their specific community. Consequently, the 'activist' demographic has shifted from a younger, urban-centric profile to a broader cross-section of the population, including older residents and those in remote areas whose civic participation is strictly tied to local survival needs rather than national political movements.

Map 1. Communities (hromadas) in which the survey respondents reside (based on Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space: Part 3, 2025).



This finding suggests that the 2022 invasion served as a unique catalyst, activating a layer of society that had previously remained on the sidelines of political and civic life. The resilience of the sector is therefore not merely a continuation of established networks, but the result of a powerful infusion of new energy – citizens for whom the defence of their community became their first major entry into public engagement.

However, this influx of new energy faces structural challenges. While the mobilisation phase successfully brought these newcomers in, the institutional phase of 2025 risks pushing them out. As governance becomes more bureaucratic because of adaptation to the war reality and recovery planning more technical, the data indicates a 'closed circle' effect. Newcomers, who are essential for the long-term vitality of the sector, often lack the specific skills or connections to navigate complex government consultations. In polycentric terms, this represents a narrowing of the decision-making nodes, where influence threatens to contract back to the same experienced individuals who have the stamina to navigate the system, thereby reducing the system's overall inclusivity and adaptive capacity.

By January 2026, the continuity of civic participation faces a rupture driven by mobilisation and demographic exhaustion. The focus group discussions reveal that the 'closed circle' of activists identified in 2025 is not merely stagnating but physically shrinking. A critical dynamic observed in the fourth year of the war is the departure of key civic leaders into the Armed Forces. As one activist noted, there is a growing internal moral pressure within the sector: continuing civic work instead of military service is increasingly perceived as insufficient, leading experienced managers to step down and enlist.

This creates an acute 'institutional memory gap.' Participants describe a qualitative degradation of human capital: the 'passionate' segment of the population has largely departed (either to the front or abroad), and finding qualified replacements is becoming impossible. The activists remaining on the ground report that newcomers often lack the specific skills or intrinsic motivation required to sustain complex projects. From a polycentric governance perspective, the loss of these 'passionate' leaders means the collapse of critical operational nodes, forcing organisations to contract or suspend activities, which directly weakens the distributed architecture of local resilience.

1.3. Inner Motivation and Resource Allocation

Institutions and procedures do not operate in a vacuum; they are sustained by specific people who act as the human infrastructure of local democracy. Therefore, the factors of the internal resilience of the activist sector as mental health and financial resources is a foundational metric for the external resilience of the community.

The survey data indicates that this human infrastructure consists of individuals who occupy multiple, often overlapping roles. The current sample includes 120 activists, 78 women and 42 men, with an average age of 44 (median: 41; range: 18-79). Respondents are split evenly between occasional and consistently active volunteers. The sample is dominated by education and NGO workers, reflecting strong civic infrastructure outside formal government. Three-quarters of participants work in education or the civil society sector. Specifically, 38% are employed in education and science – primarily teachers, lecturers, and researchers – while 36% are active in NGOs and community organisations. Entrepreneurs account for 8%, and public servants just 2%, indicating limited representation from formal local government. Another 15% selected 'Other,' mostly cultural and creative professionals.

This occupational structure helps explain the deepening crisis of fatigue. Qualitative insights from focus groups conducted in 2025 highlight that the primary driver of burnout is not merely workload, but the emotional weight of 'irreplaceable responsibility.' Participants described a psychological trap: because the circle of active participants has narrowed (as noted in section 1.2), existing activists feel they cannot step back because there is 'no one to pick up the flag.' This creates a sense of being held hostage by one's own conscience, where taking a break feels like a betrayal of the community or the war effort.

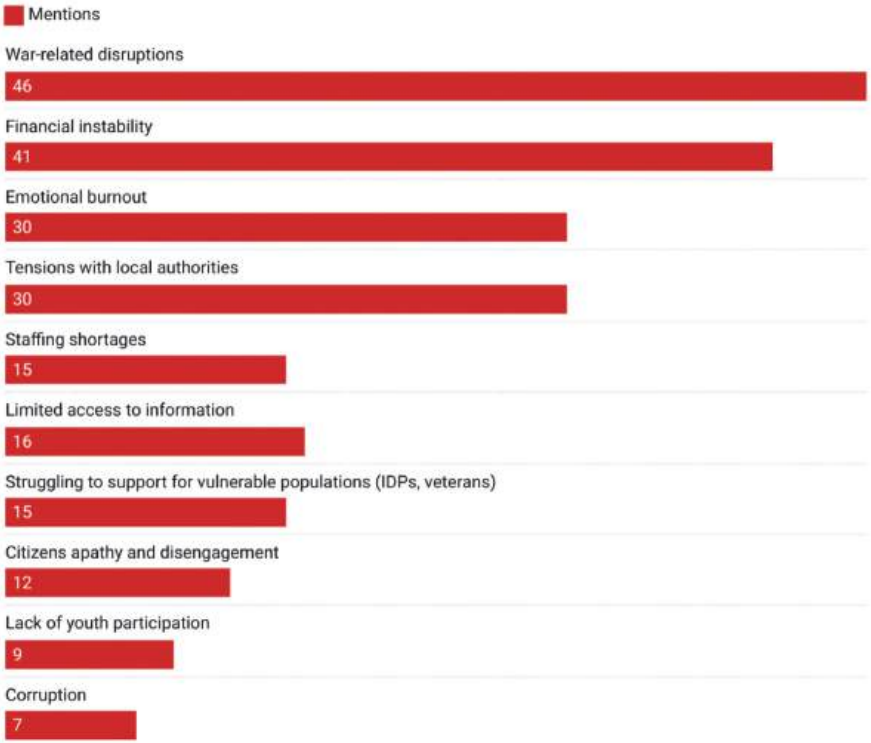
Focus group discussions further revealed a stark contrast in motivation compared to the early days of the war. If 2022 was characterised by 'adrenaline-driven' mobilisation, 2025 is marked by 'duty-driven' perseverance. The risk of chronic exhaustion and burnout adds important nuance to some of the drivers of NGOisation and the institutionalisation of previously informal initiatives. A recurring theme in the qualitative data is the 'dual burden' dilemma: activists are expected to secure their own families' economic survival while simultaneously managing community aid, often without salary. Focus group participants noted that while international donors fund 'projects,' they rarely cover the operational costs or living wages of the volunteers implementing them, sometimes forcing activists to draw on their personal savings to keep initiatives alive.

The quantitative data confirms this precarious reality. In 2025, the challenges reported by these actors shifted from external threats to internal existential risks. 'Financial instability' (41 mentions) and 'Emotional burnout' (30 mentions) were cited as the top barriers to sustained activity – actually ranking higher than security risks. Activists report 'running on empty,' acting as intermediaries who absorb the emotional trauma of their communities (grief, displacement, anger), while facing personal economic uncertainty. Without systemic support to replenish this human capital, the resilience of the community remains critically fragile.

The observed emotional exhaustion and financial instability carry a significant structural dimension: they undermine not only individual well-being but also the reproducibility of democratic practices. When control and cooperation depend on a few "indispensable" individuals, any loss of those people translates into institutional memory loss and reduced accountability.

In this logic, polycentric governance emerges as a structural offload mechanism: it is designed to distribute functions among multiple autonomous centres to reduce the risk of systemic collapse due to a single node's exhaustion. Therefore, stabilising these activist "nodes" and embedding them in predictable, funded procedures is not merely a social policy but a fundamental requirement for a resilient democratic architecture.

Figure 3. What are the main challenges facing civil society activists now? (taken from Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space: Part 3, 2025).



By January 2026, the motivational drivers of civic activists have shifted from a general sense of duty toward a deeper, rooted commitment to local survival. Focus group participants describe their continued engagement not merely as a choice, but as the only viable response to existential threats. For respondents in frontline Sumy and Zaporizhzhia, motivation is increasingly anchored in a defence of local identity and territory – a refusal to abandon their home regions despite intensifying risks. In other cases, such as in Odesa and Poltava region, activism has evolved into a personal coping strategy, where ongoing civic work provides a necessary sense of agency and psychological stability amidst external chaos.

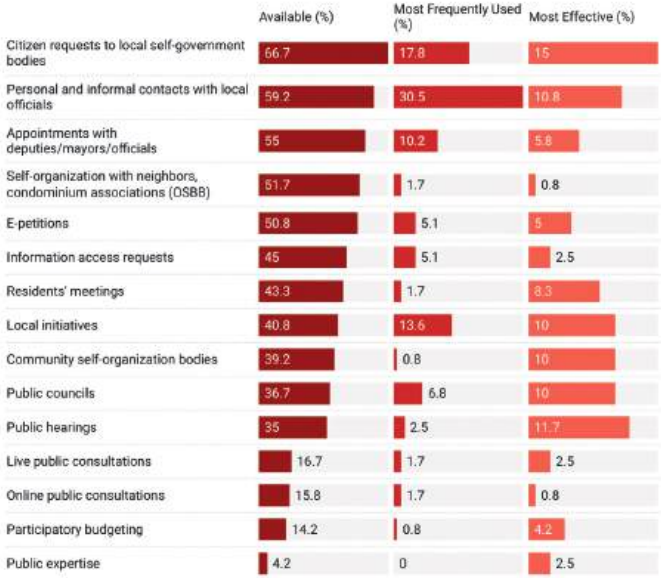
However, this internal resilience is being besieged by a critical resource vacuum. The 'financial instability' identified in previous waves has escalated into a structural withdrawal of operational support. Activists in frontline communities and smaller towns report that international donors are increasingly reluctant to fund projects in high-risk zones or cover basic administrative costs like rent and utilities. This forces organisations to close physical hubs – which often served as the only 'islands of stability' with electricity and internet for residents – or revert to purely volunteer models that are financially unsustainable for the activists themselves. With such donor withdrawal and without targeted investment in these nodes' core costs, the transition from 'emergency civicness' to 'durable governance' remains stalled.

Part 2: External Resilience of Local Self-Government

2.1. Engagement Tendencies: Informal Channels over Formal Procedures

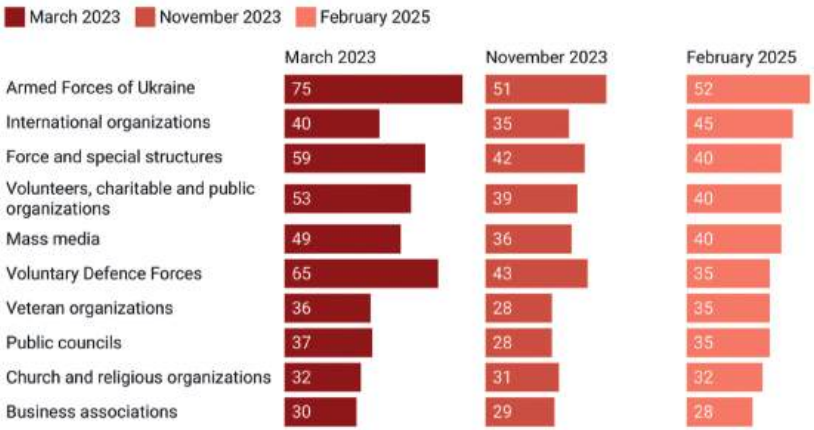
Findings indicate that external resilience at the local level is shaped less by institutionalised democratic procedures and more by personalised, informal modes of engagement. Citizens overwhelmingly rely on personal and informal contacts that are used by approximately 30% of respondents while formal participatory mechanisms, such as public hearings, are used by only about 2.5%. This stark gap suggests that engagement is not embedded in routinised institutional channels but instead depends on interpersonal networks and direct access to specific actors. In the context of polycentricity, this highlights a high person-dependence: from in-depth interviews we see that trust levels are significantly higher for individual figures (such as mayors and volunteers) than for local self-government institutions as abstract entities.

Figure 4. Citizen engagement channels: availability, usage, and effectiveness (taken from Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space: Part 3, 2025).



According to surveys conducted across the same cohort of respondents during all three waves, perceptions of structured interaction have generally declined in 2023 and plateaued in 2025. The initial surge of wartime solidarity, marked by intense local coordination and community mobilisation, appears to have diminished over time, as identified in previous reports and related studies, making room for more fragmented or institutionalised forms of cooperation. This tendency we have seen also in surveys of LSGs, that become engaging non-governmental stakeholders for pragmatic purposes: attracting resources to the community and meeting the needs of vulnerable social groups (IDPs and veterans) (Darkovich et al. 2024).

Figure 5. LSG systematic cooperation (taken from Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space: Part 3, 2025).



Despite these challenges, perceptions of corruption appear to be improving. Compared to early 2023, far fewer respondents in 2025 considered local corruption 'very common' (down from 34.7% to 16.8%). Those who said corruption in their hromada was not common rose to 46.4% from 33.1%. This positive shift likely reflects improved administrative procedures, more structured governance, and stronger civic pressure – especially following public campaigns like 'Money for the Army,' which increased scrutiny of local budgets and defence-related spending.

Figure 6. Perception of corruption in the community (taken from Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space: Part 3, 2025).

At the same time, the report shows that decentralisation has created structural conditions for polycentric governance, enabling multiple local actors – elected officials, volunteers, civil society representatives, and informal leaders – to simultaneously perform governance functions. However, rather than being coordinated through formal participatory institutions, this polycentricity operates primarily through informal, person-to-person interactions. As a result, resilience remains person-dependent rather than institutional: the system functions because actors can mobilise decentralised authority through trusted individuals, not because formal procedures are perceived as effective, accessible, or binding.

The gap between formal participation mechanisms and the dominance of informal channels should be interpreted not just as an institutional deficit, but as a specific form of wartime polycentricity. In this configuration, multiple actors (local authorities, volunteers, NGOs, informal leaders) act as centres of influence, but interaction occurs mainly through personal connections rather than procedures (see Figures 4-5). This explains the simultaneous high adaptability and high person-dependence: the system works as long as trust and access to key individuals remain. The report later returns to this conclusion in Section 2.6, where polycentric governance is defined as the framework to institutionalise these informal configurations without losing local flexibility.

Figure 7. Local resource mobilisation during the crisis (taken from Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space: Part 3, 2025).

By 2026, the reliance on informal channels has entrenched a model of 'substitute governance'. In frontline cities like Zaporizhzhia, engagement has shifted from advocacy to direct service provision, where civic actors effectively perform functions of the state (e.g., tactical medicine training) that authorities are unable to fulfil. NGOs are thus treated less as partners and more as outsourced providers.

Conversely, where 'political' decisions are concerned, formal procedures have become purely tokenistic, a trend significantly exacerbated by the expansion and frequent rotation of Regional Military Administrations (RMAs). In cities such as Odesa, the recent transition to a military administration model has centralised strategic decision-making and budgetary control in the hands of appointed heads, effectively sidelining elected city councils and traditional participatory mechanisms. Participants in the January 2026 focus group from Odesa and Sumy describe a 'closed door' reality where leadership changes frequently void prior agreements, forcing activists to navigate a system of selective administrative access. In this environment, public consultations are often reduced to a formality, while critical outcomes are determined within narrow executive circles. This personalisation of power means that civic influence is no longer guaranteed by law or procedure but depends entirely on the 'human factor' and the willingness of a specific official to maintain a dialogue.

2.2. Governance and Security

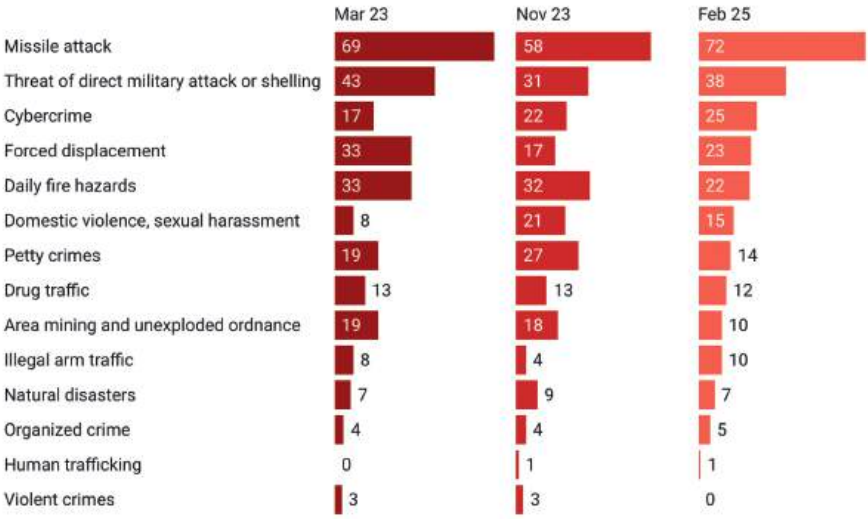
For local activists and residents, the perception of local self-government (LSG) is filtered primarily through the lens of security. Over the three waves of the study, the definition of 'physical resilience' has evolved from immediate survival (shelters) to complex infrastructure maintenance (energy), creating a new governance dynamic dominated by civil-military cooperation. In the first year of the full-scale invasion, the legitimacy of local authorities was inextricably linked to their ability to provide physical safety. High levels of trust were recorded for mayors and LSGs simply for remaining in place and managing basic chaos – organizing bomb shelters and humanitarian logistics. Security was viewed as a tangible, immediate service.

By late 2023 and continuing into 2025, the security landscape shifted toward institutionalised crisis management. A central feature of this period is the growing role of Regional Military Administrations (RMAs) – temporary governance structures that work during Martial Law. Survey data from the second and third waves indicates that coordination between elected local bodies and appointed military administrations has become the dominant operational mode. This 'dual governance' structure has generally been assessed by respondents as effective for operational tasks – specifically for infrastructure protection and rapid response to attacks.

However, the 2025 analysis reveals a critical tension: the trade-off between security and transparency. While the physical side of governance has stabilised, it has come at the cost of democratic openness. The attacks on energy infrastructure shifted the focus of 'physical resilience' to the provision of generators and electricity. Local authorities are judged on their ability to keep the lights on, often requiring rapid, opaque procurement decisions. Respondents increasingly report that 'security concerns' are used as a blanket justification to restrict access to information that is not sensitive, such as budget allocations or recovery plans.
Consequently, while the physical resilience of communities has strengthened through better civil-military coordination, the democratic aspect of this security compact is fraying. Activists accept the necessity of martial law restrictions but are increasingly wary of how these 'temporary' security protocols are becoming permanent features of local governance, insulating decision-makers from public scrutiny.

The "dual" system of governance under martial law (combining elected local bodies and appointed military administrations) simultaneously creates opportunities and constraints for democratic polycentricity. While this coordination can boost operational capacity during a crisis, it also heightens the asymmetry of access to decisions and normalizes exceptional regimes of opacity. This represents a critical test for the polycentric model: multiple governance centres are democratically productive only if they do not become channels for selective access and "closed doors." To prevent this, there is an urgent need for procedural safeguards that ensure minimum standards of public accountability even under severe security constraints.

Figure 8. Respondents' perceived importance of security threats (taken from Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space: Part 3, 2025).



By January 2026, the governance of security faces a paradoxical challenge: while the threat level has intensified, public responsiveness is declining due to 'safety fatigue' and normalisation of danger. In frontline hubs like Zaporizhzhia, activists report a disturbing trend where residents increasingly ignore air raid alerts and basic safety protocols, creating a culture of fatalism that complicates civil protection efforts. This apathy forces local authorities and NGOs to shift tactics from broad public education to targeted interventions in schools or shelters, as mass mobilisation for safety training becomes less effective.

Furthermore, a significant tension has emerged between grassroots defence initiatives and state regulation. Respondents highlight a legislative lag wherein the state remains wary of decentralised military-related activities. For instance, in regions facing the threat of infiltration by sabotage groups or drones, local gun owners and volunteers express readiness to engage in defense but are constrained by a legal framework that treats such initiatives as potential violations rather than assets. This reflects a broader governance dilemma: the state's desire to maintain a monopoly on violence clashes with the necessity of leveraging local 'resistance resources' in the face of an encroaching frontline.

2.3. Democratic Asymmetry and Socio-Economic Conditions

There is a dynamic of what might be called democratic asymmetry in the evidence provided by the local activist network; by which we mean the uneven distribution of resilience and democratic capacity across Ukrainian hromadas, shaped primarily by territorial location rather than civic motivation or institutional design alone. In practice, citizens' ability to remain engaged, resilient, and politically active is strongly conditioned by where they live – particularly whether their hromada is located in a rear or frontline area.

The democratic asymmetry between rear and frontline communities fundamentally involves an asymmetry of polycentric capacity. As depopulation, staff burnout, and fiscal pressure deepen, the very local "nodes" of civicness that provided resource mobilisation, mediation, and oversight begin to weaken. In polycentric terms, this means the architecture operates unevenly: while rear hromadas may successfully institutionalise their democratic space, the frontier risks falling into a "substitutive" model where civic actors are forced to perform state functions as a desperate measure. Supporting these frontline nodes is therefore essential for maintaining the territorial integrity of Ukraine's democratic resilience.

Evidence from the second wave demonstrates pronounced territorial inequalities. Rear hromadas recover significantly faster across key indicators, while frontline communities experience prolonged disruption, slower economic stabilisation, and weaker administrative capacity. For frontline hromadas, constant security risks, infrastructure damage, population displacement, staff shortages, and fiscal pressure combine to constrain not only service delivery but also the space for democratic participation. Under such conditions, local authorities prioritise emergency response and basic functionality, while citizens face heightened psychological stress and material insecurity that undermine sustained civic engagement.

Findings from the key respondents survey in 2025 further clarify how democratic asymmetry operates among the general public, as opposed to organised activists. Data from our third wave show that declining participation is driven primarily by economic barriers, including inflation, rising energy costs, and increased household vulnerability. In frontline and near-frontline hromadas, these pressures are amplified by higher unemployment, disrupted local economies, and elevated living costs associated with insecurity. As a result, civic participation becomes increasingly uneven: residents withdraw not due to apathy, but because participation competes with basic survival needs.

This growing asymmetry has been partially recognised at the policy level. In autumn 2025, the government launched a targeted support programme for frontline territories, aimed at stabilizing local governance under conditions of prolonged war (Government of Ukraine, 2025). The programme focuses on additional fiscal support, infrastructure recovery, energy resilience, and administrative capacity-building for frontline hromadas. While not explicitly framed as a democracy-support initiative, such measures are crucial for mitigating democratic asymmetry by reducing the material and institutional constraints that suppress participation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that democratic resilience in Ukraine is territorially uneven and structurally conditioned. Without sustained, differentiated support for frontline hromadas, decentralisation risks reproducing unequal democratic outcomes where the capacity to participate, organise, and hold authorities accountable depends less on formal rights and more on geography. Addressing democratic asymmetry therefore requires not only institutional reforms, but also territorially sensitive governance and recovery policies that recognise frontline hromadas as a distinct democratic risk group within Ukraine's decentralised system.

By early 2026, democratic asymmetry has evolved into a significant crisis, giving rise to what focus group participants describe as the phenomenon of 'hollowed-out' or 'ghost-like' hromadas. This applies not only to occupied municipalities operating in exile but increasingly to government-controlled frontline communities facing rapid depopulation. Focus group participants from Sumy and Poltava regions describe a drastic demographic collapse (in some cases, losing up to a third of their population) which severs the link between governance and the community. In these emptying territories, 'democratic space' is becoming a theoretical concept, as the physical base of residents required to sustain local services and civic oversight simply vanishes.

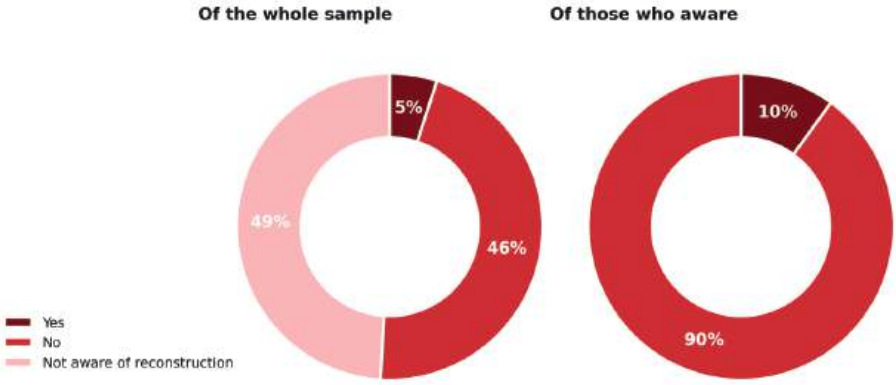
Simultaneously, residents remaining in these frontline hubs face a paradoxical economic squeeze: 'frontline inflation' amidst service degradation. Activists report that the influx of military personnel and the scarcity of service providers have driven up local prices (e.g., for rent or basic services) to levels comparable with the capital, despite the depressed local economy. This economic distortion further marginalises vulnerable groups and local activists, who find themselves priced out of their own cities, forcing a choice between civic engagement and economic migration.

2.4. Recovery and Reconstruction

Recovery and reconstruction have emerged as the central arena in which the future trajectory of Ukraine's local democracy is being determined. Unlike the immediate emergency response phase, which necessitated speed and informal ad hoc solutions, the recovery phase demands long-term strategic planning and resource allocation. The 2025 analysis identifies a critical tension within this sphere: while the administrative machinery of recovery is becoming increasingly organised and structured, the democratic space for citizen oversight and agenda-setting appears to be narrowing.

When interpreting the survey data regarding civic engagement in these processes, it is essential to account for the heterogeneous impact of the war. In the third wave of the study, a significant proportion of respondents – approximately 49% – indicated that they were 'not aware' of reconstruction activities in their communities. This result cannot be explained by transparency deficits alone. Rather, it partially reflects the geographical unevenness of the conflict: many rear communities, or those that escaped direct occupation, do not currently require large-scale physical reconstruction. In these contexts, the lack of awareness is a function of the absence of projects rather than the suppression of information.

Figure 9. Awareness of participation restrictions in recovery (taken from Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space: Part 3, 2025).



However, in communities where active recovery is underway, the data reveals a distinct openness gap between information flow and meaningful influence. The emerging model of recovery governance is increasingly characterised by a technocratic drift. Driven by the dual pressures of international donor compliance and the need for rapid execution, local authorities frequently privilege expert-led decision-making over broader public deliberation. While this approach enhances administrative efficiency and aligns with the strict reporting requirements of external partners, it creates a dynamic where recovery is treated as an engineering and logistical challenge rather than a social or political process.

This dynamic has resulted in a stratification of civic participation. Civil society actors are frequently integrated into the recovery architecture, but their role is often limited to the downstream stages of the policy cycle – specifically, implementation and monitoring. Activists are valued partners for distributing materials, facilitating community repairs, or verifying project completion. Conversely, the upstream stages of agenda-setting – such as determining budget priorities, selecting which infrastructure projects to sequence first, or defining the strategic vision of the hromada – remain largely insulated from public input.

Consequently, while the physical infrastructure of communities is being restored, the democratic ownership of these projects risks being diluted, fostering a model of managed participation where citizens are viewed as beneficiaries rather than co-creators of their community's future.

The described "technocratic drift" in recovery is directly linked to one of the weakest mechanisms of polycentric governance identified in our study: the facilitation of local knowledge. Data from our panel regarding low awareness and limited citizen involvement (see Figure 9) indicate that even where information flows exist, citizens do not convert it into influence over the agenda. In polycentric terms, local nodes of civicness often "plug in" only at the downstream stages of implementation and monitoring, while the upstream stages of agenda-setting and design remain closed. To move beyond episodic participation, this knowledge-facilitation mechanism must be systematically institutionalised.

By 2026, the recovery process is increasingly stalled by a crisis of administrative competence and 'bureaucratic detachment'. Activists involved in implementing reconstruction or educational projects report a growing disconnect between the technical requirements set by local authorities and the reality on the ground. Respondents from Zaporizhzhia describe encountering 'square terms of reference' (impractical and incompetent tender specifications), where officials either lack the expertise to articulate needs or set unrealistic demands due to a lack of understanding of the subject matter. This incompetence forces civic actors to waste resources navigating poorly designed procurement processes rather than delivering aid.

Moreover, in the absence of effective state mechanisms for legal protection or recovery support abroad, activists are turning to digital self-help tools. A striking example from Odesa involves the use of AI to navigate foreign legal systems and protect the rights of displaced Ukrainians, filling a void left by state diplomatic services. This indicates that while the formal 'machinery' of recovery may be stalling, civic actors are independently innovating to bypass institutional failures, albeit in an ad-hoc and scalable manner.

2.5. Tensions and Social Cohesion

Perhaps the most complex finding of the 2023-2025 period is the state of social cohesion. While the overarching narrative of Ukrainian society remains one of unity and resilience, the granular data reveals that this cohesion is neither static nor conflict-free. Rather than a total absence of conflict, the resilience of hromadas is defined by their ability to manage a growing web of structural and normative tensions without fracturing.

At the same time, it is important to note that perceptions of social conflict are not universal. Only 43% of respondents reported the presence of social conflict in their community. However, qualitative narratives suggest that where tensions do emerge, they tend to reflect pre-existing structural divides that have been intensified by wartime pressures. The quantitative data from the third wave provides a clear hierarchy of these frictions. When asked to identify the primary sources of conflict in their communities, respondents pointed overwhelmingly to 'Tensions between IDPs and local residents' (18 mentions). This was followed by 'Religious divisions' (11 mentions), and notably, emerging conflicts related to 'Military duty and mobilisation' (9 mentions) and 'Civil-military divides' (9 mentions).

Qualitative insights from focus group discussions and interviews allow us to deconstruct these numbers, revealing that these tensions are primarily driven by distributive justice rather than identity. Interviews from 2025 confirm that the friction between displaced persons and host communities has evolved from the initial shock of 2022 into a chronic resource competition. In the 2025 focus group, respondents rarely cited linguistic or cultural differences as the root cause. Instead, grievances were anchored in material realities: competition for scarce jobs, rising housing prices, and access to humanitarian aid. A recurring theme in the qualitative data is the perception of 'inequality of care.' Local residents in economically depressed communities frequently expressed frustration that international aid is strictly targeted at IDPs, leaving vulnerable locals without support. Conversely, civic activists noted a 'paternalistic' or 'consumerist' attitude among some beneficiaries, creating a tension where activists feel their volunteer labor is taken for granted rather than appreciated.

A more sensitive, yet increasingly visible tension identified in the 2025 interviews revolves around the concept of 'contribution.' As the war lengthens, a silent but palpable divide is emerging based on proximity to the frontline and participation in combat. Focus group discussion participants described a 'justice gap' between families with members serving in the Armed Forces and those perceived as 'shielding' themselves from the war effort. This creates a complex 'moral hierarchy' within the community. Activists noted that this tension often plays out silently – in the lack of trust between neighbours or in the unspoken judgement during public gatherings – rather than in open confrontation. It represents a fundamental question of the social contract: who is bearing the cost of the nation's survival. In this respect, it illustrates the specificity of civicness within the Ukrainian context where the public good constructed through civic activities and networks involved a concept of public authority that is inseparable from the war effort. But, at the same time, while these civic ties manifest in numerous forms of everyday collaborative resilience and survival by citizens, the direct defence of the nation from Russian aggression nonetheless falls on a still small minority of armed forces personnel.

Crucially, findings from our study suggests that these tensions have not led to the collapse of social order in part due to the mediation work of civil society. Activists and local volunteers effectively function as the 'shock absorbers' of the community. In interviews, they described their daily work not just as logistics, but as informal diplomacy – explaining to angry locals why IDPs need help, or mediating disputes over aid distribution. However, this reliance on informal mediation comes at a high cost. It places the burden of maintaining social peace on the shoulders of the same exhausted individuals, further accelerating the burnout crisis. The cohesion of the hromada is therefore maintained through continuous, often invisible, civic labor.

Building on the previously discussed tensions regarding the 'justice gap' in conscription policy and the 'inequality of care' in aid distribution, the January 2026 findings suggest that these frictions have solidified into deep structural divides. One prominent emerging trend is 'extractive activism,' which has created significant friction between local civic nodes and large national or regional NGOs. Activists in frontline Sumy reported instances where organisations from safer regions secure large international grants for local projects but treat local grassroots actors as mere 'cheap labor' to facilitate implementation.

This hierarchy, where external organisations build their 'grant history' and institutional prestige at the expense of local knowledge without reinvesting in the hromada's long-term capacity, breeds profound resentment. Local actors feel that their proximity to the front and their unique experiential capacity are being commodified by intermediaries who manage projects from a distance while local volunteers bear the brunt of the operational and security risks.

These internal sector tensions are compounded by a widening 'openness gap' in local governance, most notably reported in Odesa. In this environment, focus group participants highlighted that while the closure of national property and land registries remains a state-level policy, it is increasingly being exploited by unscrupulous local authorities who use wartime security protocols as a blanket justification to insulate decision-making from public scrutiny. This lack of transparency is utilised at the local level to shield opaque redevelopment schemes – such as the contested plans for the Odesa City Garden's Summer Theater – effectively neutralizing civic oversight. This dynamic suggests that long-standing domestic frictions, particularly over land use and local resources, never truly disappeared; rather, they were temporarily overshadowed by the immediate necessity of resisting the external enemy. By 2026, however, these pre-existing tensions are re-emerging with renewed intensity.

Activists and local volunteers effectively function as the 'shock absorbers' of their hromadas, engaging in 'informal diplomacy' to mediate disputes over aid distribution and explaining the needs of marginalised groups to frustrated locals. They create 'islands of stability' where formal institutions fail to provide clarity or support (Wittke, 2023). Yet, this reliance on informal mediation comes at a high psychological cost. The burden of maintaining social peace rests almost entirely on the shoulders of an exhausted activist core. The social fabric of the hromada remains critically dependent on this 'invisible civic labor' of individuals who are themselves on the brink of total emotional and financial burnout, highlighting a resilience that is as remarkable as it is precarious.

The analysis of social tensions reveals that civicness performs an additional often invisible governance function: mediating local conflicts and managing resource deficits. However, when this "peacekeeping at home" rests solely on the informal work of a small group of exhausted individuals, it reproduces the same trap of person-dependence seen in other sectors. In a robust polycentric system, conflict mediation should not be an individual "heroic" effort but a repeatable practice supported by formal platforms and procedures.

The following section outlines how such institutionalisation can strengthen the mechanisms of mobilisation, knowledge-sharing, and innovation.

2.6. Opportunities for Local Democracy: Polycentric Governance

A viable response to civic burnout and the emergence of closed, inward-looking circles in democratic polycentric governance – understood as a system in which multiple, partially autonomous centres of decision-making coexist, cooperate, and learn from one another within a shared institutional framework. Rather than concentrating authority and responsibility in a single institutional core or a narrow group of overburdened actors, polycentric governance distributes governance functions across interconnected nodes, including local self-government bodies, civic organisations, volunteer networks, professional communities, and external partners.

Polycentric governance in Ukraine identifies three essential mechanisms that support resilient local governance: mobilisation of local resources, facilitation of local knowledge, and experimentation and innovation (Keudel and Huss, 2023). Unlike hierarchical governance models, polycentric systems distribute authority across multiple actors, allowing for localised decision-making, mutual learning, and adaptive problem-solving. Mobilisation of local resources has enabled communities to activate volunteer networks, reallocate budgets, and coordinate humanitarian aid swiftly. The facilitation of local knowledge has allowed community-driven insights to influence recovery strategies, while experimentation and innovation have spurred localised solutions to infrastructural and logistical challenges. These polycentric mechanisms have contributed to sustaining local governance and civic participation during the most intense periods of conflict.

Figure 10. Polycentric governance mechanisms (taken from Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space: Part 3, 2025).

Evidence from the 2025 report highlights both the presence and the limits of this model in practice. Collaborative partnerships are among the strongest polycentric mechanisms currently operating in Ukrainian hromadas, reflecting their capacity to mobilise diverse actors for crisis response. Similar findings about the importance of partnerships for local resilience, mechanisms are seen in works of Keudel and Huss (2023), Rabynovych et al.

(2023) and Darkovich et al (2025). At the same time, facilitating local knowledge remains comparatively weaker, indicating that while cooperation exists, it is not yet systematically transformed into shared learning, institutional memory, or scalable innovation. As a result, polycentricity often functions informally and unevenly, rather than as a fully institutionalised democratic architecture.

From the perspective of civic resilience, polycentric governance offers a structural solution to two interrelated challenges identified throughout the report: activist burnout and the reproduction of closed participation circles. By expanding governance beyond personalised networks and enabling structured cooperation across sectors and territories, polycentric arrangements diffuse responsibility, reduce individual overload, and open participation to new actors. In this sense, networking is not merely supportive but constitutive of governance capacity under prolonged crisis conditions.

For Ukraine's local governance system, achieving democratic polycentricity requires moving beyond ad hoc collaboration toward deliberate institutional design. This entails: (1) strengthening platforms for horizontal exchange between hromadas; (2) embedding mechanisms for knowledge-sharing and co-production into local decision-making; (3) ensuring that civic actors can participate through transparent, predictable procedures rather than solely through personal access; and (4) aligning decentralisation with safeguards that prevent recentralisation or elite capture under wartime constraints. Looking ahead, polycentric governance constitutes one of the key pillars of Ukraine's democratic future. Decentralisation has already created the structural preconditions for multiple centers of authority; the central task now is to consolidate these into a democratic polycentric system that combines flexibility with accountability. If collaborative partnerships and local knowledge facilitation are institutionalised rather than personalised, polycentric governance can serve not only as a crisis-management tool but as a durable foundation for post-war democratic renewal and resilient local self-government.

The 2026 qualitative snapshot confirms that polycentric governance has transitioned from a collaborative ideal into a pragmatic model of 'substitute resilience' in high-risk zones. In hromadas where formal state institutions are overstretched or paralyzed by energy deficits and personnel crises, civic actors have evolved into critical operational nodes that fulfill core state functions. Respondents from Zaporizhzhia and Sumy described how their organisations no longer merely 'consult' with authorities but act as primary providers of national resistance training and tactical medicine – services the state is currently unable to scale.

In summary, the empirical trajectory from 2023 to early 2026 describes a necessary transition from emergency civicness (mass, often informal mobilization and mutual aid) toward a stabilising regime of polycentric governance. Our data show that while polycentricity already exists de facto (through networked coordination and substitutive functions) it remains largely personalised and territorially uneven. The key challenge for Ukraine's democratic future is to institutionalise these mechanisms to reduce burnout, broaden participation, and prevent the "closed doors" effect. This transformation preserves the main achievement of the wartime period which is high local adaptability, while building a durable, accountable, and resilient democratic architecture.

Conclusions

The trajectory of local democracy in Ukraine has evolved from a period of mass emergency mobilisation in 2023 to a precarious state of 'institutional survival' by early 2026. Evidence from our three-wave longitudinal panel of 120 activists reveals that while the initial years of the invasion were defined by unprecedented horizontal cooperation, the fourth winter has introduced compounding crises: severe energy deficits, intensifying military pressure, and a critical personnel shortage as civic leaders mobilise into the Armed Forces. This democratic fatigue has narrowed the active civic core, leaving local governance increasingly dependent on an exhausted group of activists who face a 'dual burden' of managing community aid while struggling for their own economic and physical survival.

A profound democratic asymmetry has emerged between rear and frontline hromadas. In high-risk zones, civil society has transitioned into a model of 'substitute governance,' performing some state functions that formal authorities are unable to fulfil due to their overloading. However, this resilience is threatened by a widening 'openness gap' and the centralisation of power within military administrations. Increasingly, security concerns are used as a blanket justification to restrict transparency in reconstruction and budgeting, shifting local governance away from formal participatory procedures toward personalised, informal networks where civic influence depends entirely on the 'human factor' rather than institutionalised rights.

In this context, the report highlights polycentric governance as a vital structural solution to the current crisis of activist burnout and relatively closed participation circles. By distributing authority and responsibility across interconnected nodes – including local self-government, NGOs, and volunteer networks – polycentricity prevents the concentration of power and reduces the burden on overstretched individuals. Rather than relying on a single institutional core, this model leverages local knowledge and fosters experimentation, allowing hromadas to maintain functionality even under extreme stress. Transitioning from informal, person-dependent cooperation to a deliberate, institutionalised polycentric system is the most viable way to protect the democratic space from hollowing out or being captured by local elites.

Ultimately, sustaining Ukraine's democratic resilience requires a fundamental recalibration of both state policy and international donor strategies to support this polycentric architecture. Support must move away from standardised, externally designed schemes toward direct, flexible, and multi-year investments in locally rooted civic nodes. Recognizing frontline hromadas not merely as vulnerable territories but as critical laboratories of governance is essential for a recovery that is both efficient and democratically resilient. The goal for the post-war era must be to institutionalise the extraordinary wartime surge of civic engagement into a durable, decentralised, and accountable governance architecture.

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About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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