

MAPPING UKRAINE'S DEMOCRATIC SPACE (2023-2026)

Civil network research in 40 localities

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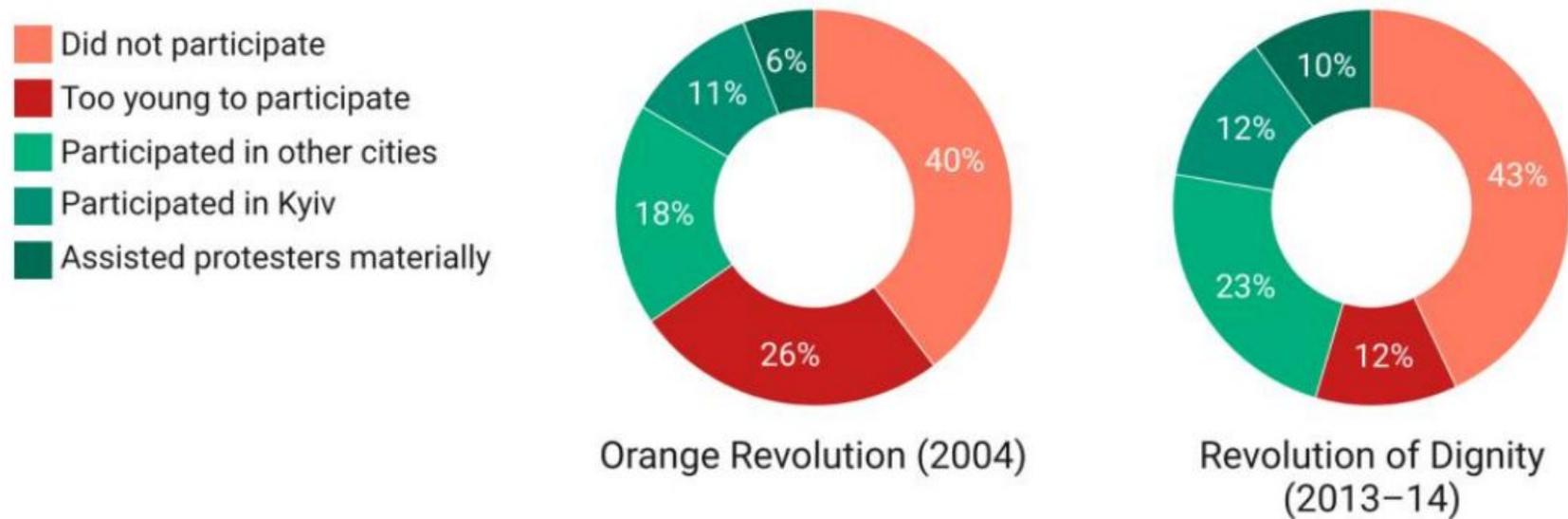
Methodological Approach

Central research question: How is the full-scale war transforming the relationship between local authorities and civil society in Ukraine?

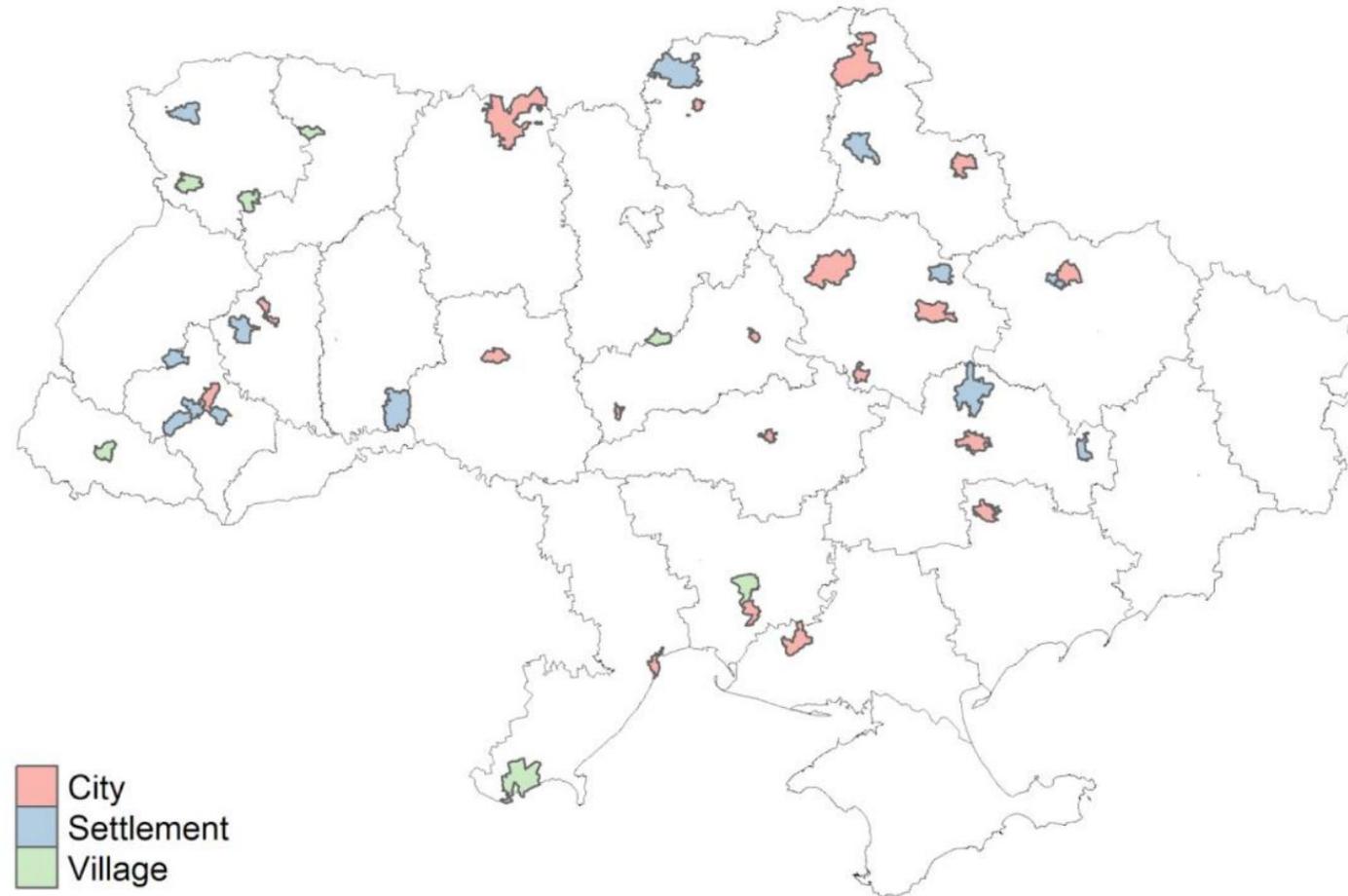
- **Respondents:** A network of **120 local activists across 40 hromadas (communities)**.
- **Sample:** Panelists met criteria of 2-3 years' local residence and active civic involvement; 78 women and 42 men (average age 44), mostly educators and NGO members.
- **Data:** Three surveys (Mar 2023, Nov 2023, Jan-Feb 2025) combined with semi-structured interviews and a focus groups in March 2025 and January 2026.

Methodological Approach

Figure 13. Previous activism experience of key informants.



Geographical Scope of the Research



2025 Findings: The Crisis of Internal Resilience

- **Shift in Motivation:** Transition from 'adrenaline-driven' mobilisation (2023) to 'duty-driven' perseverance (2025) amidst chronic exhaustion.
- **Top Barriers to Activity:** Financial Instability (41 mentions) and Emotional Burnout (30 mentions) are now the primary obstacles, ranking significantly higher than direct security risks.
- **The 'Dual Burden':** Activists are trapped between managing community recovery and securing their own family's economic survival, often without a salary or operational support from donors.
- **The Personnel Crisis:** Experienced managers are increasingly mobilising into the Armed Forces, leading to an 'institutional memory gap'.

2025 Findings: The ‘Openness Gap’ in Local Governance

- **Personalised vs. Institutionalised Power:** Citizens rely on informal access: 30.5% of respondents use personal contacts with local officials, while formal participatory mechanisms (e.g., public hearings) are used by only 2.5%.
- **Corruption Perception and Satisfaction with LSG:** Overall satisfaction with interactions with local authorities declined from 55% in 2023 to 47%. The share of activists describing local corruption as “very common” fell from 34.7% in early 2023 to 16.8%; those saying corruption is uncommon rose to 46.4%. Local governments may be more procedurally sound, but activists report routinisation, procedural opacity and symbolic participation mechanisms. Trust built in the crisis phase is eroding as governance becomes more distant and less transparent.
- **Technocratic Drift:** Recovery is being treated as a logistical/engineering challenge rather than a social process, often siphoning off the democratic agency of residents.

2025 Findings: Social Cleavages

Only 43% of respondents reported the presence of social conflict in their community.

The most common tension arises from perceptions that IDPs receive aid that long-term locals lack. Distrust of male IDPs stems from suspicions of avoiding military service.

Open question: "Do you think there are conflicts between different social groups in your community? Please specify which groups? What caused these disagreements or tensions?"

Tension between IDPs and local residents

18

Religious divisions (OCU vs. UOC-MP)

11

Military duty and mobilization-related conflicts

9

Civil-military divides (veterans, active military, civilians)

9

Language-related conflicts

9

Distrust toward local authorities

8

Economic inequality and disparities

8

Cultural or ethnic tensions

6

Conflicts over political preferences

4

2026 Qualitative Snapshot: Institutional Survival

- **A New Reality:** Activists report a shift from 'democratic fatigue' to a state of 'institutional survival'. Severe energy deficits have forced the closure of physical civic hubs, erasing the 'islands of stability' that anchored community life. Consequently, local resilience has shifted from buildings to people, with activists becoming the primary 'human infrastructure' sustaining the social fabric.
- **The Specter of 'Hollowed-Out' Frontline Hromadas:** Rapid depopulation is reaching a critical threshold, effectively severing the vital link between governance and the community while dissolving the human foundation of local democracy.
- **Extractive Activism:** Rising resentment toward large development organisations that utilise local activists as low-cost implementers for grant delivery without reinvesting in local core capacity or operational costs. A preference for deploying external consultants over local agency, leading to a stark wage gap where international salary scales demotivate unpaid local volunteers and hollow out community-rooted organisations.

Civics: Roles, Risks, and Trajectories

- **The ‘Shock Absorber’ Role:** Activists have evolved into essential social mediators, holding the local social contract together by resolving frictions between social groups.
- **Limited Engagement:** Civic actors remain systematically excluded from upstream strategic planning and budgetary oversight.
- **Substitution as Resilience:** As formal state utilities and services overloaded, civic networks have transitioned from advocacy to 'substitute governance', providing the critical human infrastructure necessary for community survival.
- **Leadership Depletion:** The continuous mobilisation of civic leaders into the military is not just a personnel crisis, but a qualitative threat that risks leaving hromadas as ‘hollowed-out’ institutions without a local oversight core.
- **Person-Dependent Stability:** Local democratic space is currently sustained by individual stamina rather than institutional safeguards. Long-term stability depends on shifting from this precarious ‘human infrastructure’ to an institutionalised polycentric model.

For further questions or collaboration:

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