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Transformation of the Role of Civil Society in Ukraine in the Context of Full-Scale War

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The article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the transformation of the role of civil society in Ukraine in the context of a full-scale war. It highlights the importance of civil society organizations as a key factor in social resilience, resource mobilization, and state support under crisis conditions. The theoretical framework is grounded in contemporary sociological theory and the concept of active social action, which makes it possible to examine the changing nature of interaction between individuals, society, and the state under conditions of military threat. Based on empirical data from surveys of civil society organizations conducted between 2022 and 2025, the study analyzes the dynamics of social vulnerability among various population groups and identifies the emergence of a new, war-induced hierarchy of social risks. The findings demonstrate a shift in the focus of civil assistance from traditional socio-economic groups toward categories directly affected by the consequences of hostilities, as well as an increasing institutional role of non-governmental organizations within the social service delivery system. The study also identifies a declining level of satisfaction with the activities of the civil sector, which is interpreted as an indicator of intensified internal reflection and structural challenges. The article concludes by emphasizing the dual nature of civil society development, which simultaneously functions as a compensatory mechanism for national stability while facing risks related to selectivity and resource constraints.

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Key words: civil society, Russo-Ukrainian war, vulnerable populations, non-governmental organizations, social resilience, trust.

Доля Ірина. Трансформація ролі громадянського суспільства в Україні в умовах повномасштабної війни. Метою статті є комплексний аналіз трансформації ролі громадянського суспільства в Україні в умовах повномасштабної війни. Актуалізується значення організацій громадянського суспільства як ключового чинника соціальної стійкості, мобілізації ресурсів і підтримки держави в кризових умовах. Теоретичний аналіз ґрунтується на положеннях сучасної соціології та концепції активної соціальної дії, що дає змогу розкрити зміну характеру взаємодії між особистістю, суспільством і владою в умовах воєнних загроз. На основі емпіричних даних опитувань організацій громадянського суспільства у 2022–2025 роках проаналізовано динаміку соціальної вразливості різних груп населення та визначено формування нової, воєнно обумовленої ієрархії соціальних ризиків. Показано зсув фокусу громадянської допомоги від традиційних соціально-економічних груп до категорій, безпосередньо пов'язаних із наслідками бойових дій, а також зростання інституційної ролі неурядових організацій у системі надання соціальних послуг. Виявлено тенденцію до зниження рівня задоволеності діяльністю громадянського сектору, що інтерпретується як ознака посилення внутрішньої рефлексії й структурних викликів. Зроблено висновок про подвійний характер розвитку громадянського суспільства, яке водночас є компенсаторним механізмом національної стійкості та стикається з ризиками селективності й обмеженості ресурсів.

Ключові слова: громадянське суспільство, російсько-українська війна, вразливі верстви населення, неурядові громадські організації, соціальна стійкість, довіра.

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of studying the role of civil society in Ukraine during the war is due to profound social, political, and security transformations unfolding in the context of Russia's full-scale military aggression.

The war has fundamentally altered the functioning of both the state and society, making the mobilization of internal social resources – such as volunteer movements, civil society organizations, grassroots initiatives, and informal networks of mutual assistance – an urgent necessity. Under crisis conditions, civil society has emerged as one of the key factors supporting national defense capabilities, humanitarian assistance, and overall social stability.

Furthermore, wartime conditions have redefined the role of civil society as an actor in state–society relations. Civic initiatives increasingly perform functions traditionally associated with state institutions, particularly in the fields of social protection, assistance to internally displaced persons, and support for military personnel and their families. This transformation necessitates scholarly analysis of new models of partnership between the state and civil society, as well as mechanisms for coordinating and institutionalizing civic engagement.

In addition, the war has intensified the importance of civil society as a space for the formation of national identity, solidarity, and trust. Active citizen participation in volunteer and civic initiatives contributes to social consolidation, the strengthening of horizontal ties, and the accumulation of social capital – factors that are critical for resisting external aggression and countering information threats. In this context, research on civil society provides deeper insight into the mechanisms of social cohesion and societal resilience in Ukraine, drawing on accumulated wartime experience (Dolia & Alpeissova, 2024).

The relevance of this issue is further enhanced by the need to understand the long-term consequences of the war for democratic development in Ukraine. Civil society functions not only as a crisis-response mechanism but also as a potential agent of post-war reconstruction, public oversight of power, policy formation, and reform implementation. Scholarly analysis of these processes is essential for anticipating trajectories of Ukraine's post-war societal development.

Thus, research on the role of civil society in Ukraine during the war is relevant both scientifically and practically, as it enables an understanding of the transformation of social institutions under crisis conditions, the identification of factors contributing to social stability, and the development of a theoretical and methodological foundation for effective state – society interaction in wartime and post-war contexts.

The article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the transformation of the role of civil society in Ukraine in the context of a full-scale war.

1. ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN STUDIES

The issue of civil society has long been a central focus of socio-philosophical, sociological, and political science research. Within classical theoretical approaches – most notably those of Tocqueville (1859) and Habermas (1954) – civil society is conceptualized as an autonomous sphere situated between the state and the private realm, ensuring self-regulation, social integration, and democratic oversight of power. In contemporary theoretical frameworks, greater emphasis is placed on civil society as a space for social action, communication, and the production of social capital (Habermas, 1994).

In Western sociology, the concepts of social capital (Putnam & Garrett, 2020), collective action, and network-based forms of self-organization (Castells, 2010) have made substantial contributions to understanding the active role of citizens. These approaches explain how horizontal ties, trust, and participation in civic initiatives enhance societies' capacity to adapt to crises and emergency situations.

Within the Ukrainian scholarly tradition, research on civil society intensified following the political upheavals of 2004 and 2013–2014. Ukrainian sociologists and political scientists analyze civil society as a key factor in democratization, European integration, and as a counterbalance to patrimonial and oligarchic models of power. Particular attention is devoted to volunteering, grassroots self-organization, and the growth of citizens' political agency.

A distinct strand of research focuses on the role of civil society under conditions of armed conflict and crisis statehood. These studies emphasize the compensatory function of civil society organizations, which assume functions traditionally performed by the state, particularly in the areas of social protection, humanitarian assistance, and support for military personnel and internally displaced persons. Scholars argue that war fundamentally transforms the nature of civic engagement, shifting it from normative participation toward a realm of existential choice and responsibility (Hatsko, 2024).

At the same time, contemporary research identifies a number of critical challenges. These include the risks of selectivity in civil assistance, resource depletion among civil society organizations, unequal access to support for different social groups, and the potential decline in the inclusiveness of civil society under conditions of protracted war (Aassve et al., 2024). Other scholars stress the importance of analyzing internal transformations within the civil society sector itself, such as professionalization, bureaucratization, and the intensification of internal critique. Communication plays a crucial role in this process, directly influencing either the activation or decline of civic engagement (Ardanaz et al., 2023).

Despite the growing body of literature, the role of civil society in the context of a prolonged war remains insufficiently systematized. There is a lack of comprehensive studies that integrate theoretical perspectives with long-term empirical data and examine the interconnections between transformations in social vulnerability, the institutional development of civil society organizations, and prospects for democratic development in the post-war period. This gap underscores the need for further scholarly investigation in this area.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework of the study is based on the activity approach, according to which civil society is conceptualized as a space for the implementation of active social action by social actors, particularly under conditions of crisis and war. Within this perspective, civic engagement is understood as a form of conscious participation in social and political processes, which acquires an existential dimension in wartime.

An important role in the study is also played by the structural-functional approach, which enables an analysis of the transformation of the roles and functions of civil society organizations within the systems of social support, social service provision, and interaction with state institutions. The application of this approach makes it possible to identify the compensatory and integrative functions of civil society under conditions of military instability.

The empirical basis of the article is a secondary analysis of data from the panel sociological study “Civil Society in Ukraine during the War 2025”. The study was conducted within the framework of the project “Strong Civil Society in Ukraine – the Driving Force of Reforms and Democracy”, implemented by ISAR “Ednannia” (2025) with financial support from Norway and Sweden. Data collection and analytical processing were carried out by the Social Indicators Center. The primary objective of the study was to provide a comprehensive assessment of the functioning of civil society organizations under wartime conditions, including the identification of key wartime challenges, the evaluation of adaptive capacities of civil society organizations, and their potential involvement in post-war recovery processes.

The research design is panel-based and includes three waves conducted in 2022, 2023, and 2025. The 2025 wave was carried out between June 13 and July 10. Data were collected through a telephone survey of representatives of civil society organizations. In total, 1,201 respondents were surveyed, including public organizations (n = 832), charitable organizations (n = 290), other organizational and legal forms (n = 29), and entities registered as persons engaged in financial activities (n = 50).

Ukrainian sociologists emphasize the significant methodological challenges associated with conducting social research under wartime conditions. Intensive hostilities, large-scale internal and external migration, and the lack of up-to-date demographic statistics generate profound constraints for empirical research. As a result, scholars are compelled to adapt their methodological strategies by employing alternative data collection tools, including online surveys and respondent recruitment via digital platforms and social media, in order to access social groups that are inaccessible through traditional field methods. However, the use of such approaches is associated with notable methodological limitations, particularly reduced sample representativeness and an increased risk of systematic bias in research findings (Sydorov et al., 2025).

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

The social existence of individuals in contemporary society presupposes their continuous involvement in various communities, to which they become affiliated in different ways throughout their lives. The trajectory of modern social development is increasingly shaped by the transition of social interaction into the digital sphere, which significantly transforms the forms and content of human activity. Under these conditions, social activity is manifested not merely quantitatively but through its qualitative characteristics.

As emphasized in Alvin Toffler's theory of the "three waves" of civilization, it is precisely human activity that transforms the individual from a bearer of "first nature" into a subject of a "second," technologically mediated nature. This transformation is embedded within broader social goals, interests, and needs (Toffler, 1970, p. 12). In this sense, the aggregate of human actions, efforts, and practices shapes the general direction of societal development and determines its future prospects. Consequently, the analysis of social development necessarily raises the question of how individuals' worldviews, levels of education, and moral orientations influence social change.

One of the central tendencies in modern sociology is the turn toward subjectivity and the identification of the active principle in social action. However, this active principle is not realized in an abstract social space but is mediated primarily through power relations and varying degrees of participation in political processes. Thus, civic activity should be understood not only as social engagement but also as a form of political involvement that reflects an individual's position within structures of power.

The reality of civil society is determined by the relationship between its normative ideal and the actual social conditions in which this ideal is implemented. Civil society thus represents an ongoing process of societal improvement encompassing governance, politics, and individual development, as well as the pursuit of freedom, equality, justice, and other social, moral, and cultural values (Klymenko, 2022). At its core, the concept of civil society involves the transformation of a collective governed by natural forms of coexistence into a community of citizens bound by shared norms and responsibilities. Through this process, society becomes capable of forming a new type of citizen, who, in turn, contributes to the further development of civil society. The state plays a key mediating role in this dynamic, undergoing its own transformation as a form of modern political authority.

Under conditions of war, these theoretical propositions acquire particular urgency and practical significance. Warfare fundamentally reshapes both the nature of individual social activity and the modes of inclusion in social and political processes. Whereas in peacetime individual activity is often mediated indirectly – through professional roles, digital communication, or institutionalized forms of participation – wartime conditions render civic engagement more immediate and existentially meaningful. Individual activity transcends purely instrumental practices and becomes a form of civic choice and responsibility, directly linked to survival, solidarity, and collective resilience.

3.1. Transformation of the Structure of Social Vulnerability in Ukraine in Conditions of War: the Role of Civil Society

War exposes the interconnection between individual subjectivity and power relations, clearly demonstrating that participation in the political process is not limited to formal mechanisms of representation. Instead, it is increasingly realized through volunteerism, community self-organization, information resistance, support for the Armed Forces, and a wide range of humanitarian initiatives. In this sense, civil society in wartime appears not as an abstract normative construct but as a living social practice in which the active dimension of social action is embodied in the everyday interaction of citizens with one another and with the state.

The analogy with the civilizational transformation described by Alvin Toffler acquires new meaning under wartime conditions. The "second-nature" individual – technologically mediated and deeply embedded in digital space – is simultaneously compelled to return to fundamental values of collective survival, solidarity, and moral choice. Digital technologies function not only as instruments of communication but also as tools for mobilizing civic potential, fostering new horizontal ties, and strengthening social cohesion (Toffler, 1970, p. 25).

Thus, during the war, the reality of civil society in Ukraine is shaped not only by the relationship between normative ideals and empirical conditions but also by society's capacity for self-regulation, self-sacrifice, and collective responsibility. While in peacetime the state traditionally served as the primary integrative actor, wartime conditions increasingly give rise to partnership-based interactions between state institutions and active citizens. This shift contributes to a transformation in the nature of power itself – from predominantly hierarchical forms toward more networked and interactive configurations. Within this process, a new type of citizen emerges: not merely a bearer of rights and obligations, but an active subject of historical change, capable of influencing the trajectory of societal development even under conditions of existential threat (Salnikova et al., 2022).

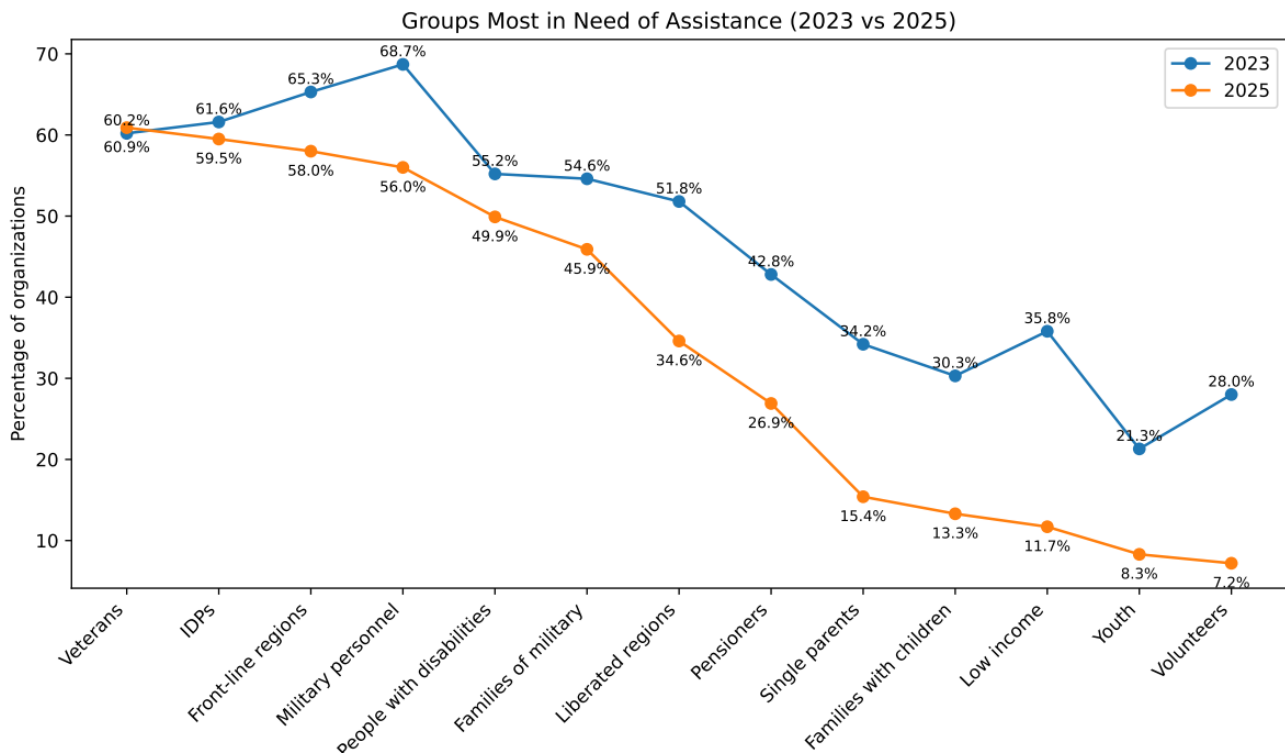


Fig 1. *«In Your Opinion, Which Categories of People in Ukraine Need Help the Most?», %*
Source: made by the author based on (ISAR “Ednannia”, 2025, p. 63).

The empirical data obtained from surveys of civil society organizations conducted in 2022, 2023, and 2025 make it possible to identify significant changes in perceptions of social vulnerability among various population groups in Ukraine under conditions of a full-scale war. These shifts reflect not only the objective scale of social problems but also transformations in priorities, resource capacities, and the functional role of civil society organizations within a crisis-affected society. Comparative analysis reveals a general decline in the proportion of responses identifying most social groups as highly vulnerable in 2025. This trend should not be interpreted as a reduction in population needs; rather, it indicates increasing selectivity of assistance, forced concentration of limited resources, and the gradual institutionalization of specific areas of support. Under these conditions, civil society organizations increasingly operate within a framework of constrained choice, focusing on groups whose vulnerability is most directly legitimized by wartime circumstances.

In 2025, the highest levels of need, according to assessments by civil society organizations, were attributed to veterans (60,9 %), internally displaced persons (59,5 %), residents of frontline areas (58,0 %), and military personnel (56,0 %). The predominance of these categories points to the emergence of a war-related model of social vulnerability, in which security risks, physical and psychological trauma, destruction of housing, and the erosion of social networks constitute the primary determinants of need. The heightened attention to veterans in 2025, in particular, suggests a shift from emergency assistance toward post-traumatic support and social reintegration. Overall, these patterns indicate the consolidation of a relatively stable, war-induced structure of social vulnerability centered on the consequences of hostilities, trauma, loss of income, housing, and social ties (ISAR “Ednannia”, 2025, p. 63).

At the same time, a marked decline is observed in assessments of vulnerability among traditionally recognized socio-economic groups. The proportion of responses indicating high levels of need decreased for pensioners (from 42,8 % to 26,9 %), persons with disabilities (from 55,2 % to 49,9 %), low-income populations (from 35,8 % to 11,7 %), families with children (from 30,3 % to 13,3 %), and single-parent households (from 34,2 % to 15,4 %). This trend reflects a reorientation of civil assistance away from structural socio-economic risks toward vulnerabilities directly associated with warfare. From a theoretical perspective, this shift can be interpreted through the lens of social risk theory, according to which extreme threats lead to a re-hierarchization of needs, whereby chronic poverty and demographic vulnerability recede

in relative importance compared to immediate military dangers. The redistribution of assistance toward war-related vulnerabilities may also indicate the partial institutionalization of support for traditional socio-economic groups through state mechanisms.

Particularly noteworthy is the marginalization of certain social groups in the focus of civil assistance, including youth (8,3 %), volunteers (7,2 %), women (3,5 %), the unemployed (2,5 %), representatives of national minorities (1,2 %), and the LGBTQ+ community (2,3 %). This pattern points to a narrowing of the inclusive potential of civil society and a shift in its operational logic from broad-based social solidarity toward survival-oriented mobilization. From the perspective of social stratification theory, the war appears to generate new lines of social differentiation, with “proximity to the front” emerging as a key criterion determining access to support and resources.

Overall, the findings indicate that, under conditions of a protracted war, a selective model of civil assistance is taking shape in Ukraine, within which civil society organizations function as a compensatory mechanism for national stability. At the same time, this model entails risks of the long-term exclusion of certain social groups from systems of support, underscoring the need for further research into the balance between military expediency, social justice, and the inclusive development of civil society.

The results thus confirm that a new hierarchy of social vulnerability is emerging in wartime Ukraine, centered on groups directly affected by military operations. Simultaneously, there is a growing risk that the needs of other social groups do not disappear but become increasingly invisible amid the prioritization and mobilization of resources driven by prolonged armed conflict.

3.2. Participation of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Providing of Social Services

As of May 31, 2025, a total of 3,967 entities were registered in the State Register of Social Service Providers, including 889 civil society organizations. Within the segment of civil society providers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) constituted the largest share, accounting for 516 providers, followed by 309 charitable organizations; the remaining providers consisted of public associations, religious organizations, and professional associations. As a result, the share of the third sector within the system of officially registered social service providers reached 22,4 %, compared to no more than 15 % at the end of 2023 (525 civil society organizations out of 3,491 providers). Compared to 2023, the number of NGOs registered in the system increased by more than two-thirds (from 301 to 516), while the number of charitable organizations rose from 185 to 309, representing an increase of nearly 1,7 times (ISAR “Ednannia”, 2025, p. 67).

Survey findings indicate that representatives of non-governmental organizations highly evaluate the role of the civil sector across key areas of Ukraine’s socio-political development. The most significant contribution of NGOs, according to respondents, is their role in supporting the Armed Forces of Ukraine: 81,6 % of respondents assessed this contribution as significant. A relatively high level of support was also recorded for the involvement of the civil sector in Ukraine’s post-war reconstruction processes following the consequences of Russian aggression, with 59,9 % of respondents rating this role as significant (ISAR “Ednannia”, 2025, p. 71).

NGO activities in the sphere of international cooperation were also positively assessed. Specifically, 56,6 % of respondents identified a significant role of NGOs in the development of international cooperation, while 49,2 % emphasized their contribution to the formation of international coalitions in support of Ukraine. At the same time, assessments of NGO influence on domestic political processes – particularly democratic development and reform implementation – were more restrained. Thus, 50,3 % of respondents considered the role of NGOs in democratic processes to be significant, whereas only 44,2 % shared this assessment with regard to reforms.

Nevertheless, across most areas – except for support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine – a substantial proportion of respondents expressed moderate or skeptical evaluations. The share of respondents who viewed NGO influence as insignificant or moderate ranged from 28,0 % in the context of post-war reconstruction to 38,3 % in the sphere of reforms. Complete denial of the role of NGOs remained relatively limited and did not exceed 8 %, with the highest concentration of such assessments observed in the areas of democratic development and reform implementation (Fig. 2).

Overall, the findings indicate a generally high evaluation of the role of non-governmental organizations in Ukraine's socio-political processes. The most significant contributions of the civil sector are associated with support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine and post-war reconstruction efforts, as well as with the development of international cooperation and the mobilization of international support for Ukraine. At the same time, NGO involvement in internal transformation processes – particularly in democratic development and reform implementation – is assessed more cautiously. This pattern reflects the coexistence of positive expectations and skeptical perceptions regarding the effectiveness of NGOs in these areas. The relatively small proportion of respondents who entirely deny NGO influence suggests that the importance of the civil sector is broadly recognized, while simultaneously underscoring the need to strengthen its role in democratic governance and reform processes.



Fig. 2. Assessment of the Role Currently Played by Ukrainian Civil Society Organizations in Key Social Processes, %
Source: made by the author based on (ISAR "Ednannia", 2025, p. 71).

Data for the period 2022–2024 reveal a moderate but consistent downward trend in positive assessments of civil society organizations' activities. While the cumulative share of positive evaluations reached 90,1 % in 2022, it declined to 85,2 % in 2023 and further to 83,5 % in the most recent measurement. Particularly notable is the decrease in the proportion of respondents who report being fully satisfied with the sector's activities, which fell from 47 % in 2022 to 32 % in the current wave. At the same time, the share of critical assessments increased, as the proportion of respondents expressing dissatisfaction rose from 10 % to 17 %.

Taken together, these findings point to a gradual decline in overall satisfaction with the activities of civil society organizations over recent years. Although the general level of positive evaluations remains relatively high, the shrinking share of fully satisfied respondents and the parallel growth of critical assessments indicate heightened internal reflection and rising expectations regarding the effectiveness of the civil sector. This trend may signal the accumulation of structural challenges within the sector and highlights the need for further in-depth analysis of the factors shaping changes in perceptions of civil society organizations' performance.

CONCLUSIONS AND RESEARCH PROSPECTS

The present study demonstrates that, under conditions of full-scale war, civil society in Ukraine undergoes profound functional and structural transformations, emerging as a key factor in national stability. The military context has accentuated the active, subjective dimension of social action, in which citizens and civil society organizations not only respond to crises but also play a direct role in ensuring defense capability, social protection, humanitarian assistance, and the maintenance of social cohesion.

Theoretical analysis indicates that, in wartime, civil society ceases to function solely as a normative ideal and instead assumes the characteristics of a practical social mechanism through which interactions between individuals, communities, and the state are realized. War reshapes power relations, facilitating a shift from hierarchical governance models to networked and partnership-based forms of cooperation, within which civil society acts as a co-producer of public decisions and social services.

Empirical findings reveal the emergence of a new, war-related hierarchy of social vulnerability in Ukraine. At the center of this hierarchy are groups most directly affected by hostilities, including veterans, servicemen, internally displaced persons, and residents of frontline areas. While this structure reflects the objective logic of war, it also narrows the inclusive potential of civil society, marginalizing groups whose needs remain significant but less visible amid resource mobilization.

The study further highlights the growing institutional role of non-governmental organizations within the system of social service provision, evidenced by their increased presence in official registers and expansion of activity domains. Nevertheless, despite generally positive assessments of NGO contributions to socio-political processes, a moderate but consistent decline in satisfaction with sector performance among civil society representatives themselves is observed. This trend points to heightened internal critique and rising expectations regarding the effectiveness, transparency, and strategic capacity of public organizations over the long term.

In summary, civil society in Ukraine performs both compensatory and integrative functions during wartime, while simultaneously facing challenges related to selective aid, resource limitations, and structural constraints. These findings underscore the need to reconceptualize civil society not only as a crisis response mechanism but also as a full-fledged actor in democratic development and post-war state transformation.

Future research should focus on the long-term consequences of war for the institutional development of civil society and its interaction with the state in the post-war period. In particular, it is essential to investigate the mechanisms of transition from wartime mobilization to sustainable development and inclusive social models. Overall, further studies should aim to construct a comprehensive theoretical and empirical model of Ukrainian civil society as a critical resource for national stability, democratic consolidation, and post-war reconstruction.

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