



# Assessing Ukrainian Grassroots Activism Five Years After Euromaidan

NATALIA SHAPOVALOVA

November 2018 marked the fifth anniversary of the Euromaidan protests that upended Ukrainian politics in late 2013 and early 2014. It is a suitable time for taking stock of key changes the country has undergone, especially since researchers have begun to assess the overall progress of Ukraine's [governance reforms](#) and the role of [civil society](#).

A less visible but vitally important dimension of political change in Ukraine concerns the strengthening of grassroots civil society. According to a series of interviews with local activists in the regions of Kharkiv and Odessa, pockets of vibrant local activists are improving the lives of citizens and holding government actors accountable, even outside of Ukraine's major urban centers. But international donors and professional nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Kyiv that seek to support Ukraine's reform agenda tend to neglect civic engagement in outlying parts of the country. As a result, local civil society in Ukraine seems to be bowling alone at a time when grassroots-driven change continues to be essential to the country's future.

## BURGEONING GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM

The Euromaidan protests gave a boost to urban civic movements in Ukraine and led many citizens to take more responsibility for their country's well-being. Many Euromaidan activists were members of grassroots civic initiatives formed to [defend the rights of urban residents](#), including groups like [Save Old Kyiv](#) in the country's capital, [Green Front](#) in Kharkiv, and [General Protest](#) in Odessa.<sup>1</sup> The Euromaidan gave rise to myriad local grassroots movements known for being autonomous and volunteer-run in Kyiv and many small towns across Ukraine. The post-Euromaidan upturn in citizen donations and volunteering has been directed mainly toward countering Russian aggression. Many new grassroots initiatives have emerged all over Ukraine to help the country's armed forces and displaced residents.

Yet the hike in civic activism has been directed at local issues and community development too. In many urban centers, civic groups have mobilized for [a variety of causes](#), such as protecting parks, historical buildings,



and other notable sites; advocating for environmental preservation and animal rights; promoting healthy lifestyles and urban infrastructure development; organizing leisure activities and community events; and supporting vulnerable groups including war veterans. The grassroots activism prevalent in small towns and rural areas tends to be less formally organized and instead generally revolves around groups of activists rather than organizations registered with the government.

Some of these activists collaboratively seek to bring community members together and engage with local authorities. For example, civil society organizations in Kharkiv have sought to cooperate with the city council to promote [local street culture](#). Other forms of activism are more contentious, including efforts by local activists to mobilize their communities to resist (often illegal) actions taken by private or government actors. Some activists, for instance, have [blocked roadways](#) to draw the government's attention to poor road conditions, and others have dismantled fences around construction sites to prevent private development companies from completing [illegal construction work](#). Much of this civic activism contains elements of cooperation and conflict, such as when civic groups monitor local government actions, filing complaints and challenging [particular decisions through litigation](#) when necessary.

Diversity is another core feature of Ukrainian grassroots activism, but there are commonalities that make this activism different from the activities of traditional Western-funded NGOs. Before the Euromaidan, civil society in Ukraine (and other post-Soviet countries) was criticized for being detached from the rest of society. One analyst coined the term “NGO-crazy” to [describe a system](#) in which “professional NGO leaders use access to domestic policy-makers and Western donors to influence public policies without having a constituency in society.” Unlike the professional NGOs that tend to be concentrated in Kyiv and work on national-level policymaking, grassroots groups often act locally, are better rooted in their communities, and mobilize other community members and resources to solve local issues.

## A LACK OF SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE AND SUPPORT

Grassroots groups also depend more on volunteerism and philanthropy than professional NGOs do. Instead of paid staff, many grassroots civic initiatives largely rely on volunteers and supporters who have other day jobs or businesses to share their ideas, time, and resources. For such volunteers, civic activism is a way of life, not a career. Many grassroots groups request fundraising support from their members, use crowdsourcing to solicit pro-bono services, cooperate with local businesses and authorities, or find other ways to generate income or pursue their missions. As trust in civil society has grown since the Euromaidan, citizens now donate more to civic initiatives through online crowdfunding platforms. Established a year before the Euromaidan protests, Ukraine's [first crowdfunding platform](#), Spilnokosht, has collected 19.2 million hryvnia (approximately \$670,000) from more than 32,000 individual donors for 265 projects, as of October 12, 2018. Social entrepreneurship has become more prevalent as well.

That said, some grassroots movements, especially those working on high-profile issues such as providing assistance to Ukrainians affected by the armed conflict in the east, have managed to professionalize over time. Such groups are successfully applying for foreign-funded grants and hiring volunteers as paid staff. Nevertheless, many groups do not seek foreign funding, often because they do not have people experienced at writing the requisite applications or because they lack resources to devote to the fundraising, reporting, and accounting that such support would entail. Some groups avoid donor funds deliberately out of fear of financial dependency and bureaucratization. As one civic activist put it in an April 2018 interview, “grants will not solve all the problems: one cannot raise civic activism with money.”<sup>2</sup> Many groups say that they would be happy to receive donor funds to achieve specific goals related to their existing causes and ongoing activities rather than implement temporary projects driven by paid staff that end when the projects' timelines (and their funding)

end. For example, local activist groups could use such financial backing to, say, organize public campaigns or hire lawyers to fight against illegal actions by local governments.

Despite signs of progress, much grassroots activism in Ukraine remains akin to “dark matter.” Researcher David Horton Smith [used this metaphor](#) to signify that many scholars who study activism focus on the “bright matter” of prominent mainstream nonprofits and overlook the less visible actions of other smaller activist groups. Donor funding is concentrated in Kyiv and the conflict-torn Donbas region. Other parts of Ukraine, especially areas outside the regional capitals, receive less attention and funding. Studies and surveys of Ukrainian civil society, which are often donor-funded, rarely reach out to small civic groups. There is little knowledge about how many Ukrainian grassroots groups there are, where they operate, or how they work. And although funding for civil society in Ukraine has increased since the Euromaidan, donor support for [small civic groups](#) or informal civic initiatives is often absent. Very few donors fund new civil society ventures that do not have a documented grant history. Even modest amounts of seed money or small grants (of, say, \$500 to \$10,000) are rarely available for such ventures.

Although some regional Ukrainian civic hubs have been established since 2014, support structures for small civil society organizations and [grassroots civic initiatives](#) are still weak. New groups of activists can be wells of ideas and enthusiasm, but they often lack the knowledge, skills, networks, and resources necessary to achieve their goals and develop into sustainable organizations. Author-conducted interviews and research by other think tanks show that Ukrainian grassroots groups generally are poorly connected with other civil society organizations, including professional NGOs active in their respective cities or regions, let alone organizations in other parts of the country. [One study](#) of urban civil society networks in five Ukrainian cities found that while there are dense networks in each city, they are not connected to similar networks in other cities.

Donors do sometimes encourage Kyiv-based NGOs that partake in professional advocacy to build regional networks and engage with citizens. But, in fact, NGOs from the capital often have insufficient knowledge of [civil society in outlying regions](#) and of effective citizen engagement techniques; moreover, NGOs in Kyiv often lack the motivation to engage local populations since their own survival tends to depend on foreign grants rather than locally raised funds. These professionalized NGOs tend to outsource some work to individual civic activists in the regions, but they typically do not invest in building up local organizations.

It would be much more efficient to support peer-to-peer exchanges among grassroots groups. For example, a grassroots civic organization from the Kharkiv region that is mainly funded by local businesses received a small grant to [share its experience](#) with other activists from small towns in the region about how to monitor and influence local government officials. Some of those activists then established civic groups in their own towns, thereby forming a small informal network of local watchdogs that can share their experiences with other local residents.

Additionally, post-Euromaidan [decentralization reforms](#), by diverting power and resources from the national government to local councils, have opened new opportunities to foster grassroots civic activism. This push for decentralization has created space for increased transparency and accountability from local government and greater citizen participation. That said, donors working on decentralization reforms mainly support government bodies and engage with local authorities, while they do not work enough with civic groups.

Ukraine’s diverse range of urban centers adds variety to the country’s grassroots activism. In some places—like Kyiv or the regions of Chernihiv, Zhytomyr, and Lviv—a [more favorable environment](#) for civil society has emerged since 2014. Regional and local authorities have introduced tools for local democracy, such as participatory budgeting, online petitions, public



hearings, and funding for civil society organizations—through grants or contracts for providing social services—that is allocated on a competitive basis. Elsewhere, local and regional authorities remain closed to civil society. Moreover, in some of these places, local activists who fight against vested interests have even been attacked.<sup>3</sup> The police rarely prosecute those behind such attacks, and the vast majority of activists suspect that the perpetrators of some of these incidents may be linked with local political and business elites.

## CONTRASTING VIEWS ON POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Outside of Kyiv, in small towns and villages elsewhere in Ukraine, there are few if any established professional NGOs. Local activists often play additional roles as members of elected local or regional councils, advisers to local government officials, local business leaders, and active members of religious communities. As one civic activist put it, “In small places, there is no clear delineation between civic activism and political activism. If a person is active, she/he is active in all spheres—civic, political, [and] religious.”<sup>4</sup>

Many grassroots activists see running for public office to become local council members or mayors as the only way to improve governance in their communities and gain more power in their struggle against corrupt local elites. Ukraine’s ongoing decentralization reform has played a role in motivating many civic activists to run for local council seats. “If you as an activist want to change something, you should go into politics,” summed up an activist who was elected to Kharkiv’s city council in 2015.<sup>5</sup> Under Ukraine’s system of proportional representation, party affiliation is the only way to compete in elections, with the exception of local councils in rural areas. Ukrainian political parties have recruited civic activists onto their candidate lists for local elections in hopes of getting more votes. Yet many Ukrainian activists view politics as a dirty business and prefer to criticize the political

establishment from the outside rather than change it from the inside.

This tendency has created divisions among civic actors in post-Euromaidan Ukraine, divisions between those implacably opposed to entering politics and those who believe running for office is sometimes a necessary step toward political renewal.<sup>6</sup> Drawing a clear boundary between political activism and civic activism is understandable from the perspectives of many civic activists who fear the reputational damage that could accompany a bid for higher office. Civil society organizations are now one of the most trusted social institutions in Ukraine, whereas public trust in politicians and political parties is extremely low. But at the local level, many civic activists’ engagement in local politics is proving an effective way to renew the Ukrainian political elite and groom new types of leaders.

The new activists who have entered politics have not been able to advance far-reaching reforms in Ukraine’s nepotistic parliamentary political system, but they have challenged some elements of the status quo. They have played an important role in making the parliament more transparent, and they have served as a bridge between civil society and political parties and government structures. With Ukraine due to hold presidential elections in March and parliamentary elections in October 2019, these political activists may also play an important role as electoral watchdogs.

## BOWLING ALONE

Despite an abundance of enthusiasm for local engagement, grassroots activism in Ukraine increasingly bowls alone, often invisible to many donors and donor-funded professional NGOs based in Kyiv. Although a different type of civil society has taken shape in Ukraine since the Euromaidan protests, and while donors have done much to support Ukrainian civil society since then, they are behind the curve in terms of seizing the opportunities unlocked by this new strain of activism.

While grassroots groups do not need to receive large donations or become professional NGOs that align with Western standards, there are a number of ways Western donors (who still constitute the main source of funding for Ukrainian civil society) can support them. First, foreign donors should decentralize their funding to reach outlying regions of Ukraine, especially small towns and rural areas. Second, such donors should help Ukrainian civil society organizations learn how to raise money from local communities and authorities, and they should also introduce co-funding arrangements to further encourage local fundraising.

Third, they need to promote civil society infrastructure in the different regions of Ukraine by supporting civil society resource centers, community foundations, and other public spaces. Fourth, foreign donors can help facilitate other forms of knowledge exchanges, skills development, and connectivity among grassroots civic groups within a single region and among different regions. That way, activists can learn from each other and organize in cross-regional networks and coalitions. Such initiatives would help further strengthen

Ukrainian social capital, a key legacy of the Euromaidan movement. Fifth, donors can design educational and training programs to support civic activists who try to enter local politics. Donors need to reconsider their practice of denying any support to civil society actors that seek to enter politics. While foreign aid to Ukrainian civil society should remain nonpartisan, there is a need to strengthen the influence of civil society on politics.

For democratic change in Ukraine to truly take hold, grassroots activism needs to flourish in every part of the country. Ukraine will struggle to consolidate its democracy if vibrant civil society only exists in the capital and a few other big cities. The wave of energetic and committed activists throughout the country can help further this goal with the right assistance from foreign donors and other supporters.

*This article draws on twenty-four interviews that the author conducted with grassroots civic activists in the regions of Kharkiv and Odessa in the spring and summer of 2018.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Natalia Shapovalova** is a visiting fellow at Carnegie Europe, where her research focuses on Eastern Europe, with particular focus on Ukraine and EU policy toward the Eastern neighborhood.

## NOTES

- 1 A related phrase, the right to the city, was popularized by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre. It refers to a collective right of city dwellers to exercise power over the processes of urbanization and “to change and reinvent the city more after [their] . . . hearts’ desire.” Today, the phrase is also associated with social movements worldwide that resist urbanization patterns led by the global and national capital-holding class.
- 2 Author interview with a civic activist from Derhachi, Kharkiv, April 2018 ,24.
- 3 In the region of Kharkiv, on June 2018 ,5, a local environmental and anticorruption activist was [found hanged](#) in the forest. On July 2018 ,31, in the region of Kherson, a female civic activist who also served in the municipal administration was lethally wounded by an [acid attack](#). In Odessa, meanwhile, a civic activist who fought against illegal construction who was also chairman of the local branch of a political party [was shot](#) on September ,22 2018. These are just a few recent cases, and many similar attacks remain unreported.
- 4 Author interview with a civic activist from Lozova, Kharkiv, April 2018 ,25.
- 5 Author interview with a civic activist from Kharkiv, March 2018 ,7.
- 6 Author interview with a civic activist from PISOCHYN, Kharkiv, April 2018 ,24.

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