

# Ukrainian Civil Society: Past Lessons and Future Possibilities

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In Ukrainian academia, the last decades have seen growing interest in the concept of civil society, which has been studied from different disciplinary angles. Commentators disagree on the level of development it has reached in Ukraine. They emphasize its absence in Soviet times, and the general lack of organizational initiative in contemporary Ukraine. In this essay, I show that, although these critiques of Ukrainian civil society are crucial for comprehending its historical evolution, the history of Ukrainian civil society can also help us understand how it might evolve in the future, both during and, hopefully after, the current war. In my analysis, I focus on two particular lines. The first is the interaction between civil society and the state, which shifted from an anti-state attitude to a model of partnership. The second, which operates in the background, is how civil society has struggled with different utopian ideas, over the 20th and early 21st centuries. Analyzing this relationship to different utopian ideas helps us understand how the relations between civil society and the state changed over time. I conclude with a question about European challenges.

*Keywords:* civil society, state, anti-state model of civil society, partnership model of civil society, democratic values

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## 1. Introduction

The term “civil society” describes a set of autonomous groups independent of state institutions, economic institutions, or families, in which public deliberation and collective action can take place (e.g. Schmitter 1997, 240). It provides a helpful lens for studying socio-political changes. In Ukrainian academia, the last decades have seen growing interest in the concept of civil society, which has been studied from different disciplinary angles. Commentators disagree on the level of development it has reached in Ukraine.

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They emphasize its absence in Soviet times, and the general lack of organizational initiative in contemporary Ukraine. In this essay, I show that, although these critiques of Ukrainian civil society are crucial for comprehending its historical evolution, the history of Ukrainian civil society can also help us understand how it might evolve in the future, both during and, hopefully after, the current war.

At the moment, Ukrainian civil society is going through a phase of accelerated change. In my historical analysis, I focus on two particular lines. The first is the interaction between civil society and the state, which shifted from an anti-state attitude during much of the Soviet era to a model of partnership in the late-1980s and at various points in the post-Soviet period. The second, which operates in the background, is how civil society groups have struggled with different utopian ideas, both in the 20th and in the early 21st century. Analyzing this relationship to different utopian ideas helps us understand how the relationship between civil society and the state changed over time. It makes explicit the normative dimension of civil society, which concerns its relation to democratic values. This, finally, leads to questions about the relationship between Ukraine and Europe. What could be a European vision for Ukrainian civil society? Could it become a new direction of development for Ukraine? And how can it be prevented from becoming another unhelpful utopia?

## **2. The Anti-State Model of Civil Society**

The development of Ukrainian civil society in the 20th century was influenced by two main conceptions of civil society: Eastern and Western. Historian Ivan Rudnytsky (1987) claims that since its inception as the Kievan Rus, Ukraine has been a Western nation sharing a common cultural and social heritage with other Western nations. The Eastern component of Byzantine culture also had a significant impact on the foundation of Ukrainian society. In later centuries, the Kievan Rus assiduously combined Western social and political organization with Byzantine Christianity and its cultural traditions. Threats from outside and within led to the split of the Kievan Rus in the thirteenth century into two parts, eastern and western. In the western part, Galicia, which was influenced by its European neighbors, civil society achieved full maturity in the early 20th century. In the east of Ukraine, in contrast, the processes of forming civil society were very different, for it was influenced by the Russian socialist movement and its concept of civil society.

In 1918, Ukraine joined the USSR as a sovereign nation on a par with Russia and the other Soviet republics. The Soviet system was founded on civic engagement, and the early years following the 1917–1921 revolution sped up the process of transforming Ukrainian society into a modern society in the

first wave of “Ukrainization.” The 1920s saw remarkable economic growth, cultural independence, and improvements in the fields of education, science, literature, and the arts. According to Rudnytsky (1987, 467), the Soviet Ukrainian Republic had nearly reached the status of a culturally independent nation by 1930. For Ukrainian society, which had not undergone industrialization and had been thrown into chaos by the First World War and the Revolution, socialism, with its focus on the common good, was an attractive idea (Popovych 1997). However, this idea was based on the utopian notion that a small group of people, the communist party, could develop a just society. Over the years, this led to the exclusion of civil society from active political engagement. Under the rule of Stalin, strong state controls of all social activities were established, suffocating civil society.

This quickly led to the rejection of Soviet ideology in Ukrainian society, especially in art and literature. The number of Ukrainians who were subjected to repression in Stalin’s era provides evidence of the widespread opposition to this totalitarian system. Excluded from active participation in political life, civil society begins to crystallize in the non-political domain. According to Kasianov (1995), after Stalin’s death and the ensuing weakening of totalitarian rule, a new chapter in the history of Ukrainian civil society began. The state gradually allowed the liberalization of various areas of life, but most importantly in the social-cultural realm. The most liberated times during the Soviet era were the late 1950s and early 1960s, with “informal associations” of rockers, hippies, etc., flourishing until the late 1980s. It was a time when theater, cinema, circus, and other parts of popular culture were actively developing, leaving their mark on society as a whole.

In the 1960s, intellectual life flourished as a generation of young intellectuals rethought the achievements of Ukrainian, Soviet, and global culture and developed their own progressive civic positions, emphasizing the values of freedom, sincerity, and the inner life of human beings. This younger generation argued that living up to existential principles and regaining authenticity was essential. Through poetry, prose, and theater, human dignity was affirmed with extraordinary force. Using Havel’s (1985) term, this 1960s movement can be characterized as an “existential revolution.” One reason for this flourishing of intellectual civic life was the absence of state pressure. Nonetheless, as Kasianov (1995) notes, it is still impossible to argue that Ukrainian society had become autonomous and independent of state power. While the “sixties” generation emerged as a result of very little “oversight” by the authorities, the era of Brezhnev’s repressions put an end to this movement (Kasianov 1995, 12–31).

The intervention of the state led to the politicization of some aspects of civil life. Civilian groups, that were originally non-political, became polit-

ical because of their opposition to the regime. The government made an effort to exclude these organizations from society. Kasianov (1995) shows how Brezhnev's repressions during this time brought moral and intellectual resistance into the political sphere. An example of this movement is the Lviv underground group "Ukrainian Workers' and Peasants' Union," which was founded in 1959 to oppose the Soviet Union's post-totalitarian legal system. It picked up the push for civil rights and reforms from the USSR, at first believing in the possibility of peaceful internal reform. But the organization's members were detained, and secret trials were held, with the so-called "group of lawyers" being found guilty and imprisoned. As a consequence, the Ukrainian Helsinki Group was established in 1976, as an openly public organization joined by religious leaders and former nationalists. The organization's goal was to uphold democracy, the rule of law, and the civil rights of Soviet Union citizens. It held that civil society should be integrated into the political system rather than try to overthrow it.

One more significant phenomenon is worth noting, namely the dissidents' movements. Their numbers did not surpass a thousand or two, making them appear insignificant in comparison to the official culture. However, as Riabchuk (2000) points out, a far greater number of people adopted their novel ideas, thanks to the dissemination of samizdat press among friends and family, many of whom were engaged professionals in various fields. Foreign radio stations, with a sizable listenership, also disseminated the dissidents' ideas. Often, values such as the search for truth, objectivity, uniqueness, self-expression, and resistance to the official Soviet ideology were expressed in non-political literature. When liberal leaders of the Communist Party of Ukraine, academic and scientific institutions, and publishing companies were purged in the 1970s, support for dissident ideas grew further. The samizdat press helped the Ukrainian Republic break away from the USSR in 1991 by providing a platform for the exchange of new ideas (Riabchuk 2000, 160–164). The integration of dissident movements into Eastern Europe's global context created greater space for civil society (Kaldor 2003).

Therefore, these movements, which rejected violence and were wary of the Communist party's utopianism, emerged largely in opposition to the state and its "official" culture and political rhetoric. During the final decades of the Soviet Union, party propaganda was met with mistrust and humor. A vibrant, functional civil society coexisted alongside the "official" ideology, with countervailing practices, emotions, convictions, concepts, and theories. For millions of citizens, the state was perceived as "they" and civil society as "we." Many discussions took place in narrow circles—at the proverbial kitchen table—to avoid open conflict with state authorities. Drawing on an

account by Weigle and Bitterfield, Tessa Brannan (2003, 16) describes these types of civil society practices as acts of defense against government intrusion.

And yet, the Soviet period was also crucial for another feature of Ukrainian civil society: the construction of a single national space that united eastern and western Ukraine. According to Rudnytsky (1987) and Szporluk (2002), without it, the process that led to independence in 1991 would not have been possible. Ukraine had joined the USSR in 1918 as a sovereign nation, with a right to secede from the Soviet Union included in its constitution. During World War II, a second wave of “Ukrainization” took place, with all Ukrainian lands being politically united for the first time since the Middle Ages. However, this did not lead to a change in its political and legal position within the USSR. While Ukraine joined the United Nations as a sovereign member in 1945, its sovereignty was never a political reality and could only be realized in the form of partial linguistic and cultural autonomy. But still, the intelligentsia that emerged in the 1960s was no longer regionally divided, which supported the development of civil society (Rudnytsky 1987, 467, 469–470).

This anti-state model of civil society is a conflictual one, with the state trying to suppress any political initiative, diversity, and pluralism in society. Civil society groups, in turn, endeavored to establish a socio-cultural identity, revitalize national cultural customs, and contribute to the collapse of the USSR. My brief account of the anti-state model demonstrates that the dominance of the system was not absolute. Both during the Stalinist and during the post-Stalinist eras, there was individual resistance in the public domain, and growing social activity, mostly in the “a-political” spheres of private life and culture. In intellectual spheres such as education, science, and literature, societal actors criticized the moral behavior of the ruling class. However, the opposition to power was moral, not political.

The question of the position between East and West remains open: even though important civil society connections have emerged, it is unclear whether the civil societies of former USSR countries should be understood as falling under the definition of Western civil society, or whether the category should be broadened to also include other forms (see Brannan 2003 for a summary). Tymowski (1993) highlights the distinction between “communitarian and mutualistic” and “individualistic and pluralistic” values in Eastern and Western civil society. Some commentators (e.g. Wesolowski 1995) hold that the individualistic and market-oriented values of Western civil society were rejected by Eastern civil society, while others (e.g. Ost 1990, quoted in Brannan 2003, 13) argue that the Eastern civil societies of the Soviet period, with their experience of the struggle against Soviet to-

talitarianism, can be seen as a return to earlier forms of civil society. Kenney (2003), for instance, claims that civil society's efforts before Gorbachev's Perestroika helped people overcome their fears and indifference, inspired protests against the communist regime, and ultimately led to the fall of communism. So however one categorizes it, it is clear that the "anti-state" experience of Ukrainian civil society is an important factor in understanding its history and current shape.

### **3. Civil Society in Partnership with the State**

With Gorbachev's "Perestroika" (1987), a new era of the relationship between the state and civil society began. The "partnership model" emphasizes their collaboration, allowing for broad public participation in political decision-making (Chambers and Kopstein 2008). The Ukrainian state, at this time, was committed to human rights, private property, the free market, and liberal reforms. This allowed national movements to actively take part in campaigns for national liberalization. This in turn increased the scope of civil activities in the political, environmental, national-cultural, and youth domains, stimulating the formation of civil society organizations. According to Szporluk (2002), the 1991 break from the USSR was the outcome of a political coalition and compromise between the political elite of the old regime and the national movement with its roots in civil society, enabling the establishment of an independent Ukraine.

The first experiences in developing partnership relations between the state and civil society provided ground for cautious optimism. First and foremost, since the emergence of a sovereign state, civil society organizations could operate within a legal framework. The right to freedom of association was established as a constitutional right: no one has the authority to restrict this right or, inversely, to force citizens to join a public organization. This led to the establishment of numerous national and international public organizations, nonpolitical interactions with European nations, and an increase in the diversity and autonomy of social groups, lifestyles, modes of thought, and political beliefs in Ukrainian society. Student movements, women's rights movements, and environmental movements were examples of such forms of civic engagement (Stepanenko 2015, 231–232).

Second, the independent Ukrainian state attempted to resolve the language issue, granting cultural autonomy to all ethnic minorities, which aimed to promote harmonious relations between ethnic groups. Beyond the question of its linguistic and ethnic differences, the idea of the "Soviet man," according to Szporluk (2002), was taken up and modified by the new state. Nevertheless, Russia still mattered for the "language question," which was turned into the official justification for Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian

territories in 2014. Adopting a balanced position regarding the language problem will be crucial for advancing freedom and democracy after the war. According to contemporary writers such as Riabchuk (2000), Popovych (1997), and others, self-awareness, rather than language, makes a person “Ukrainian.” They reject the myth that language is the primary factor in crafting national identity. Support for this position can be seen in the rise of volunteer movements in support of the Ukrainian state during open armed aggression against Ukraine, in the Russian-speaking regions of the west, east, and south.

These initiatives can be considered a good start for the future development of democratic partnership relations between the state and civil society. But as Chambers and Kopstein (2008) point out, forming a partnership with the government is not without risk. The issue is not so much that the government interferes in civil society; rather, it is that a part of civil society might start to behave and appear like a state, falling into traps of bureaucratization, loss of accountability, and privatization of property (Chambers and Kopstein 2008, 375). In Ukraine, dealing with state property was a key issue during the post-Soviet transformations. The goal of creating a nation-state was a long-term dream, but the utopian premise was that a small number of people known as oligarchs would build a state for the common good. Using the pretext of democracy, the post-soviet political elite privatized state property and began to establish a quasi-state.

The economic reforms implemented in Ukraine since 1991 have not led to the emergence of a robust and independent middle class. For the citizens of modern-day Ukraine, bribery of officials, special connections, and corruption, remain major issues. It is difficult to refer to contemporary Ukrainian society as a “market society” and poverty is still widespread, exacerbating the state’s vulnerabilities both internally and externally. Riabchuk (2000) and Stepanenko (2015, 239–240) attribute this phenomenon to the inherent problems of power distribution and the post-soviet structural deformation of common property privatization. The non-transparent privatization of public property by the small corporate elite closely connected to the political elite led to the emergence of oligarchic capitalism.

The Orange Revolution of 2004 was sparked by civil society’s outrage over widespread political elite corruption and electoral fraud in 2004. According to scholars (Szporluk 2002, Stepanenko 2015), the Orange Revolution represented the second historical attempt of civil society to alter power structures, to democratize political processes, and to establish the rule of law after 1991. Numerous researchers assert that the state concealed the illegal nature of the activities of oligarchic groups that monopolized resources and attempted to establish an authoritarian political regime. As noted by

Stepanenko (2015, 286–287), the mafia-like, corrupt political structure did not foresee free, transparent elections, but the appointment of an heir under the guise of elections. The actions of civil society caused this system of mafia-like structures to break down. Stepanenko (2015, 299) also argues that the Orange Revolution represented a significant turning point in the development of civil society: it enhanced the practice of solidarity, mobilized resources from civil society through the use of internet technologies, and helped to create social capital in the form of horizontal ties. Finally, Stepanenko sociological research (2015, 299) has illustrated the organized nature of the Orange Revolution, shown the way its members partnered with international civil institutions, and indicated the widespread awareness its members had of its political aims and ambitions.

The Orange Revolution can be interpreted in a variety of ways: as the fight for national freedom and revival, as a power struggle between different political clans, or as the defense of the right to free and fair elections. While I leave this question open for further investigation, I would like to draw attention to its effects on civil society. According to Shporliuk (2010, 26), it restored civil society's self-esteem and faith in its own strength even though it brought corrupted political elites to power yet again. Civil society literature on revolutions claims that "unconventional" but institutionalized political participation can be seen as both evidence of the strength and vitality of democratic institutions and as a sign that they are failing (Ekiert and Kubik 1999). The revolution has also been interpreted as a manifestation of civil society challenging the claims made by the state (Kenney 2003). Thus, the Orange Revolution can be seen as a crucial phase in the establishment of democracy and the "rule of law."

The next 2013–2014 Revolution of Dignity highlights two further aspects that require consideration. The first is the morality of the state and the "social capital" it fosters; the second is the incapacity of the state to protect the nation. The survival of Ukraine as a state was threatened by Russian aggression and internal challenges to freedom and democracy. In response, volunteer movements emerged in civil society, who saw these threats as personal challenges. These volunteer movements, which have continued to exist since 2014, were crucial for supporting citizens and ensuring defense capacities that the state could not provide. Modern IT technologies and social networks were used to support civic initiatives built on values such as trust, solidarity, and democratic freedoms. This helped democratic values to spread, making the volunteer movement an exemplar of civic engagement. But as human rights activist and Ukrainian dissident Hluzman (Lashchenko 2019) points out, it was subsequently misused by the political elite to conceal a corrupted structure. War and corruption are related issues, and the actions of



the Ukrainian ruling elite contributed to the cynicism and corruption that continue to predominate.

Civil society initiatives are shaped by a strong sense of relying on oneself rather than the state. At the beginning of the war in 2014, civil society took on the role of national protector, a move not at all typical for civil society organizations. However, state authorities, having received the support of the Maidan movement in 2014, did not begin the long-awaited modernization of the country. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, the primacy of strong civil society organizations over incompetent state institutions has increased significantly. Society is united by civic patriotism, but socio-political exhaustion is also growing. Regrettably enough, the causes to be dissatisfied with the state are real, and civil society continues to be crucial for further improvements in the accountability and competence of state institutions.

In summary, the establishment of partnerships between civil society and the state has proven highly effective in the socio-cultural domain and even in the domain of national protection. In some cases, the state is absent due to a lack of funding or bureaucratic processes that are impossible to navigate. This has led to the emergence of alternative forms of governance, with civil society often winning over state bureaucracies. But the conflict between the state, with its oligarchic structures, and civil society with its different set of values, continues, increasing Ukraine's internal and external vulnerability.

#### **4. What is the Future of Ukrainian Civil Society?**

The primary obstacle that Ukrainian civil society faces today, as it did in the last century, is the utopian idea that an elite group, whether the communist party or the oligarchs, could create a just society, socialist or national. Such an elite-driven vision of society cannot help but fall back on the repression of civil society. During the Soviet era, this conflict played out in the political and cultural realm; after independence, it also played out in the economic realm. The values of civil society remain in unresolvable tension with the unaccountable behavior of the power elite.

The current challenges for Ukraine are huge: defending the interests of society rather than those of pro-government structures, fighting corruption, establishing the rule of law, and protecting the nation's territorial integrity against Russian aggression. Civil society is often seen as an effective remedy for almost all socio-cultural, economic, and political issues. But its limitations need to be taken into account: it cannot, on its own, take on government tasks such as the fight against corruption, judicial reform, and economic regulation.

A second challenge lies in the specific Ukrainian combination of national (eastern) and European (western) components of civil society. Popovych (1997) put forth a strong European ideal for the future of Ukraine: a strong, prosperous, and just political system, supported by a more egalitarian market economy. In his vision, Ukraine should bring the world together rather than divide it, both politically and economically (Popovych 1997). But Ukraine continues to stand between East and West. It has long maintained economic ties with Russia in the fields of energy and manufacturing. Its current economic collapse can be ascribed both to the imperial policies of modern Russia and to its own corrupt power elite. As a result of the war, the economic ties with Russia had to be cut, but it is not clear what could, internally, replace the oligarchic system.

How could the European choice not turn into another useless utopia? As Lisovyi (1997) correctly pointed out, it would be unhelpful to aim for an unreflective transfer of European models to Ukraine. As he writes, “Only the combination of universal, ethical, legal, scientific, economic standards with the revival of Ukrainian original culture is the strategy that opens up a reliable prospect of moral and spiritual revival” (Lisovyi 1997, 214). Many members of the global community support Ukraine, pushing it towards a Western model, but its success also depends on a deeper understanding of the specifics of Ukrainian society, as a society at cross-roads of East and West.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the University of Groningen for providing the resources and environment needed to conduct this research. Special thanks are extended to Lisa Herzog, Professor of Political Philosophy and Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, for her invaluable guidance, support, and insightful feedback throughout the duration of this project.

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