

## Romania–Ukraine: mapping and recognising civil society’s competencies in a crisis context

By [Marin Gherman](#), political scientist, journalist and academic. His work focuses in particular on civic dynamics, the media and regional relations in Eastern Europe.

Romania and Ukraine represent two different institutional contexts, yet they have been interdependent since the Russian Federation launched its large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Romania is a member state of the European Union and NATO, with a legal framework largely aligned with European standards governing the operation of non-governmental organisations. Ukraine, for its part, is a country at war, where civil society operates in an environment characterised by security emergencies, mass population displacement, budgetary constraints, military pressure and the constant need to support the country’s defence efforts.

Despite this difference in political and institutional status, both countries raise the same key question: how can we identify, map, recognise and connect the practical competencies developed by civil society organisations in crisis situations? In Romania, this issue became particularly apparent after 2022, when civic organisations, volunteer networks, local associations and informal groups mobilised very quickly to support Ukrainian refugees. In the first weeks of the war, whilst public institutions moved more slowly, these actors organised reception, accommodation, transport, food, administrative guidance and essential assistance. They often acted before the state’s bureaucratic mechanisms had stabilised, relying on flexible networks, limited resources, practical competencies and an ability to adapt that is rarely described in scientific terms. This mobilisation demonstrated that Romanian civil society is not merely a complementary voluntary sector, but a hub of operational, logistical, social and intercultural expertise. It was able to step in where public action was not yet fully established, reducing response times, simplifying access to aid and connecting refugees with local resources. Subsequently, the state gradually consolidated its response and established a degree of institutional stability in its dealings with displaced persons. However, this stabilisation does not negate the initial role played by civil society actors. On the contrary, it highlights the need for a better understanding of the skills required: coordination capacity, knowledge of vulnerable groups, cultural translation, emergency management, social mediation, rapid dissemination of information, organisation of mutual aid networks, and the coordination of local resources

with institutional mechanisms. In Ukraine, civil society operates within an even more constrained environment. Civic organisations, foundations, volunteer networks and local initiatives are grappling with internal challenges relating to human resources, funding, organisational burnout and security. At the same time, they have become key players in social resistance and the defence effort. Volunteer movements are raising funds and purchasing clothing, food, essential supplies, generators, medical equipment and resources for both internally displaced persons and the Ukrainian military defending their country. In many regions, they have supported towns left without electricity, helped hospitals to function despite power cuts, facilitated access to emergency equipment and organised direct assistance where needs exceeded the state's immediate capacity. Ukrainian civil society is also active in more structural areas: supporting education, media literacy, combating disinformation, providing psychological support, health projects, assisting displaced communities, documenting local needs and cooperating with public authorities. In the context of information warfare, media literacy and the ability to debunk propaganda are becoming strategic civic skills. In the health sector, non-governmental organisations often work closely with hospitals, local authorities and international networks to meet needs that public institutions alone cannot fully address. The situation in Ukraine has a direct impact on the situation in Romania. The geographical proximity of the war creates a zone of regional insecurity that affects Romania, its institutions, its border communities and its civil society organisations. The civil societies of both countries are therefore called upon to cooperate more closely, not only to respond to immediate emergencies, but also to build sustainable mechanisms for solidarity, mutual recognition and the transfer of expertise. Romanian organisations can act as a European interface, whilst Ukrainian organisations contribute direct experience of crisis management in wartime. Together, they can generate practical knowledge of great value for other international contexts marked by humanitarian, security or institutional crises.

There are many shared challenges. The first is the fragmentation of initiatives. Many actions remain isolated, poorly documented, low-profile and rarely integrated into a common framework. The second challenge concerns the smart centralisation of information: results achieved, beneficiaries reached, community leaders, competencies mobilised, available resources, best practices and unmet needs. The third challenge relates to coordination between local, national and international networks. Those working on the ground often possess specialist skills, but they lack connections with other organisations that have already addressed similar issues in other parts of the world.

This is why the creation of a shared platform could play an important role. It would help to highlight the skills developed by civic actors, document experiences on the ground, link small, scattered resources to wider networks, and transform local initiatives into transferable models. This process would not merely aim to showcase projects, but to recognise genuine civic expertise: expertise born of urgency, adaptability, proximity to beneficiaries, and the ability to act when institutional structures are slow, inadequate or overwhelmed. The resources of each organisation are often limited. But when they are identified, coordinated and linked, these resources can become a much more powerful collective capacity. Small-scale local expertise, when recognised, shared and replicated, can be transformed into models of good practice that are useful to other societies facing war, forced displacement, institutional fragility or humanitarian emergencies.