

# MAECENATA STIFTUNG



## MY COLLEAGUE FROM UKRAINE

A blog series by our Ukrainian guest researcher Nataliia Lomonosova

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### A “watchdog” during the war: notes on the public sphere

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Like other people actively involved in civil society organizations in Ukraine, I keep asking myself the question "What is the role of civil society organizations during a war in the country?". In the first weeks or even a month of the war this question might sound like “What to do now?” and it was about what should be done right now. Often, the answer to this question might have nothing to do with what the organization or individual activist was doing until February 24. Instead, the answer to this question could rather be related to the specific practical assistance needed by the community or certain social group with which the organization is affiliated. As a result, many civil society organizations, volunteer movements and grassroots activist groups have been involved in evacuating or receiving refugees from hostilities, delivering food or medicine, purchasing and / or transporting some humanitarian or other aid.

However, a few months after the start of the war, it may be a right time to frame the question about the role of civil society organizations during war referring to its classic functions. So far, not all CSOs have completely changed their activities during the war by fully adapting them to the needs of wartime. Some CSOs at least partially have returned to activities in the areas they were previously involved in. In this context, I would like to address one of the key roles played by civil society organizations, namely the watchdog role. This role consists in monitoring the decisions, policies, legislative and budgetary initiatives of the authorities, and offering constructive criticism and propositions, which, in the case of many organizations, represents the voices of people who do not have direct access to decision-making processes. In fact, it is this activity and this role of the civil sector that makes it an important condition / guarantee / foundation of a democratic society.

This role of civil society cannot exist without the public sphere as an open space for discussion of decision-making on all issues that are a common cause. However, during the war, this discursive arena, where private people can discuss common affairs (if we turn to the definition of the public sphere by Jürgen Habermas), underwent some changes. Upon the martial law the civil society actors have a limited instrumentarium for expressing some direct criticism of certain government decisions, for example, it's hard to imagine massive public gatherings (eg. protests, marches, etc.).

Also many decisions are made faster, and public discussions become more emotional, also in regard to discussion of which questions are on the table to discuss.

At the beginning of the week as always I`ve got a newsletter from one of the main Ukrainian informational portals for the civil society organizations. It started with the short appeal to its readers that stated that for now the main criterion for the expediency of the activities of the civil society organizations in Ukraine should be their contribution to increasing the defense capabilities of Ukrainian army. It is hard not to agree that the first and utmost goal of all Ukrainians is to defend ourselves against Russian aggression. However the state and the local authorities continue their work also in the sphere of internal affairs, either we speak of passing the new laws or elaborating and implementing new policies in response to the various social, economic, infrastructural problems created by the war. Some of these actions and policies might be well planned, some however could indeed deserve some critical remarks. There is always a danger that some disadvantaged or vulnerable groups will be left behind by some decisions and that the difficult times will be misused to enforce some policies that would otherwise not be enforced. Therefore it is important to strengthen the importance of the watchdog role of the civil society organization in times of war. In the next publications I will present the voices of a few CSOs from Ukraine which hold the watchdog roles in the number of spheres and share with you how they carry this role now.