



# MY COLLEAGUE FROM UKRAINE

A blog series by our Ukrainian researcher Nataliia  
Lomonosova

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## The work of grassroots volunteer initiatives during the war: Does the lack of legal registration pose a challenge?

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Powerful civil society organisations often emerge from grassroots initiatives and volunteer groups that have united people to address pressing issues or to meet certain societal needs that arise after extraordinary events, such as political protests or natural disasters. But once these events are over, such initiatives can go through a period of institutionalisation and professionalisation and grow into an established NGO or a foundation with long-term goals. This is exactly what happened to many grassroots volunteer initiatives that emerged during the Maidan protests in Ukraine in 2014.

People both in Ukraine and abroad (primarily representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora) first united to address the various needs of the protest movement on the Maidan, and then later to help the army and the victims of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. When the need for urgent assistance decreased, some of them revised their goals or formulated new ones and continued to help Ukraine in a more sustainable way, obtaining the legal status of an NGO or charitable foundation. For example, this was the story of a charitable organization [Razom for Ukraine](#) that grew from a network of active Ukrainians living in the US during the Maidan. Right now, the Razom team provides tactical medicine and equipment for hospitals to address the most urgent needs as they evolve and assist in evacuating vulnerable populations.

Similarly, a number of initiatives that helped internally displaced persons and victims of military aggression in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea in 2014 soon became powerful NGOs in this area. Often such self-organised initiatives, which went on to formally register, were founded by internally displaced people (IDPs) themselves. For example, [Vostok-SOS](#), which still helps IDPs to find shelter during the war, assists in the evacuation of people from conflict zones, and collects and distributes humanitarian aid.

But I would also like to address the current experience of those grassroots initiatives and volunteer groups that emerged since the war started. The Russian Federation's war against Ukraine, which began in February this year, has led to an unprecedented mobilisation of Ukraine's civilian population. There are a huge number of volunteer groups and grassroots initiatives that bring

together a few friends or neighbors or a much larger number of people and often form a complex, interconnected network.

Such groups and initiatives mostly provide humanitarian and medical aid to civilians, provide territorial defense units with means for tactical defense and assist medical and social institutions and local authorities in evacuating. These groups include people with experience of civic activism in one form or another, as well as those who began volunteering only at the beginning of the war. One thing that unites these initiatives is that they usually do not yet have a legal status — they are not registered as an NGO or a charity organisation.

But does this become a significant obstacle to activism during the war? What are the challenges faced by volunteers in purchasing and distributing humanitarian and medical aid and / or means for tactical defense that do this without registering as an NGO or other legal form? How do they solve them?

According to the main law that regulates volunteer activities in Ukraine — the Law of Ukraine "On Volunteering" — volunteering is a voluntary, altruistic, socially oriented nonprofit activity that is carried out by volunteers and volunteer organisations by way of rendering volunteer aid. It is, however, important to emphasise that the law describes volunteers mostly as those who are *voluntarily* involved in activities of existing (public, private or non-governmental) organisations and institutions. This can be done on the basis of a formal agreement or without one. People can also do any volunteer activities (“provide volunteer assistance”) individually, excluding the provision of volunteer assistance to eliminate the consequences of natural and man-made disasters and to conduct mass public events of “national and international importance”. Provision of volunteer assistance to the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other official military formations, police and other law enforcement bodies, and state authorities during the legal regimes of a state of emergency or upon a martial law, including anti-terrorist operation and other measures to ensure national security and defense is allowed for individual volunteers.

Daria R. started volunteering during the first month of the war, when a good friend of hers joined the territorial defense unit in their city and urgently needed protection. To help him Daria turned to a charitable foundation that was collecting donations from individual volunteers and purchasing protective vests and helmets abroad. This is how Daria managed to help her friend to travel west. But after that, together with her partner and another friend, she started to help the other people with similar needs, mostly those who were about to join the territorial defense unit or the Army and who lacked particular equipment such as helmets, vests, gloves etc. Alongside many other small activist groups, they began to ascertain what people needed, tried to raise funds for these needs and collaborated with various charitable organisations and other volunteers to bring these goods from abroad. In the end, the various organisations worked together to distribute the items to those who needed them.

According to Daria, one of the main challenges with these collaborations is time. Unlike individual volunteers, the big CSOs cannot work very quickly, due to bureaucratic constraints. This in turn slows the process of purchasing items that are urgently needed. According to Daria, volunteers

that do not work for a registered NGO may be able to complete tasks faster, because of the lack of bureaucratic obstacles that they face.

Serhii M. is an activist for a large grassroots initiative that unites dozens of activists in Kyiv and Lviv — Collectives of Solidarity (till recently — Operation Solidarity). The group describes itself as “anti-authoritarian volunteer network organized during the war to jointly help all progressive forces in society to counter imperialist aggression against Ukraine” and started their activities in March 2022. Its activities include raising aid and funds to purchase and deliver humanitarian aid, military equipment and medical supplies for territorial defense units and their families, helping refugees, and supporting other progressive grassroots initiatives. Collectives of Solidarity is also not registered as an NGO.

“It doesn't seem to be a problem, because everyone gets out of it somehow,” Serhii notes. “Indeed, there are a lot of things you are allowed to do without being an officially registered NGO. You don't need to have any legal status to bring food and donations to a village and help the people there. On the other hand, we are often asked if we have a volunteer ID or certificate. This may be asked by the police in the city or by workers controlling the crossing of roadblocks or customs”.

This volunteer ID or certificate exists in Ukrainian legislation but it can only be obtained by volunteers who carry out their activities within existing organisations and institutions, but not by individual volunteers or any kind of self-organised small activists groups, because there must be a legal entity that will issue such a certificate (that certifies the identity of a volunteer and a type of volunteering activities *within* the organization that she or he performs). Serhii shares that the only way for volunteers to get such certificates is to connect with an NGO, even if they will conduct their activities individually most of the time.

But indeed, there are numerous incentives for grassroots initiatives to cooperate with established NGOs. Both Daria and Serhii say that many foundations could just provide financial support or help with transport to registered organisations, because only they can provide certain documents for the foundations' financial reports. Besides that, Serhii underlines the importance of such cooperation for the purposes of customs check. “Currently, you can bring any humanitarian or medical aid or tactical protective equipment into Ukraine either for concrete military or territorial defense unit or for a registered NGO or a charitable foundation, Serhii states. Hence, it is very important for a grassroots initiative that purchases the aid abroad to have affiliation with some NGO for this purpose.

Another important aspect is cooperation with volunteers and activists abroad. People who would like to go to Ukraine now, to bring aid or to be a volunteer in the shelters for internally displaced people, for example, need to get an invitation. Generally, even before the war, despite the visa-free agreements with many countries, border guards have the right to ask foreigners when entering Ukraine about the purpose of their visit and to provide documents proving this purpose. Moreover, according to the Ukrainian legislation, foreigners may only carry out voluntary activities through existing organisations and institutions. So, if any individuals from abroad would like to join a

grassroot initiative in Ukraine, they need also to find a registered NGO and dedicate most of their volunteer activities to it.