MAECENATA INSTITUT
FÜR PHILANTHROPIE UND ZIVILGESELLSCHAFT

MY COLLEAGUE FROM UKRAINE

A blog series by our Ukrainian guest researcher
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Edition 6 | 14.12.2022

Which voices are included in an inclusive reconstruction of Ukraine?

It has been 9 months since the Russian army invaded Ukraine. Since then, fierce battles between the two armies have taken place, bombs and missiles have fallen on houses, thousands of people have died from Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure, from torture and persecution. Several million Ukrainians have been forcibly deported to the Russian Federation. Millions have fled to neighboring countries and face the hardships of refugee life. Those who remain in Ukraine live in difficult conditions, without heating, electricity, and communication networks. Russia has deprived children in Ukraine of the right to a safe childhood, and the elderly of the opportunity to spend their last years living in peace with their families.

In addition, extreme cold is on the way. I am writing this blog on the first day of winter from my temporary apartment in Berlin. In a few days, I will board a train that will take me to the Polish-Ukrainian border. There I will take another train. Then another one. And then a bus. Finally, I will reach a village where I will celebrate my thirtieth birthday. At home.

In a country that is just a few hours away from Germany by plane, the same people live, but they have electricity and access to the Internet for just a few hours a day. The rest of the time, shelling continues, and Ukrainian utility workers struggle to repair the power grids damaged by the shelling. Every week, there are new strikes on Ukrainian cities, new damages...The war continues.

When will the war end? When will we win, and when will the Russian army leave our cities and villages forever? Of course, this is the question that every Ukrainian now asks themselves. But there is another question: what will happen to us, to our state, after the war? And what will our society be like?

While the fate of the state and our independence is being decided on the battlefields, the strategies of rebuilding Ukraine after the war and the trajectories of its socio-economic development are being discussed at the same time.

Thus, in April, a presidential decree established the National Council for the Recovery of Ukraine from the War, an advisory body to the President. In less than three months, it has prepared a draft Recovery Plan that runs until 2032. It consists of 23 separate plans developed by the relevant working groups that address various thematic areas. Working group participants include representatives of civil society, such as advocacy and service NGOs, think tanks, and some activist organisations.

These plans, which were presented to the international community, set out a certain strategic vision of how the Ukrainian economy should develop, what the key principles in social and educational policy should be, how Ukrainian cities should be rebuilt and developed, and so on. They summarise how these participants conceptualise existing issues (i.e., what is defined as the problems that need attention), as well as propose specific solutions to these problems.

Although these plans are called drafts, some measures proposed within these plans have already started to be implemented. The lightning speed (given the full-scale war in the country) of the development of such visions is really impressive. At first glance, this is very positive. However, as a sociologist and policy analyst who believes in participatory and inclusive decision-making, I can't stop thinking about who is involved in the process of deciding how our country should develop in the future, and who is left out of this process. How inclusive is the process of developing recovery plans? To what extent are different voices really heard? Did all civil activists who would like to join the development of such plans really have such an opportunity? Is the voice of the civil society organisations that deal with local problems at the community level considered? To what extent have activists with different views found a place in the working groups of the National Council?

Of course, there are certain spheres, such as human rights, the fight against corruption, good governance and transparent policy-making, where many, if not most, of civil society actors share a similar agenda. But when we say (or read), for example, that Ukrainian civil society supports a certain vision of reform, what exactly do we mean? Does it mean that Ukrainian civil society is a united actor that fight 'the common good' and that there is a single definition of what is good?

No, it does not, and civil society is not homogeneous but diverse. But I keep wondering how broad the discussion about post-war reconstruction can be. Obviously, some representatives of civil society unite in different coalitions to develop alternative reconstruction plans and discuss the possible role of civil society in the afterwar reconstruction and integration of Ukraine into the EU. Some groups concentrate their efforts on making these processes transparent and participative, some comment on the content of policies proposed in the reconstruction plans and propose alternatives to them.

But whether there really is room for such discussion right now and whether there is a real possibility for NGOs or grassroot activists from local communities to participate in high-level discussions on the future of our country after the war remains an open question for me. I wonder whether they are able not only to propose something, but also to be heard by the authorities. And how such a dialogue could be organised.

The imposition of martial law has significantly limited the openness of decision-making and the possibilities for advocacy and public control have become more limited. But Ukraine is a democracy,

and we can even enjoy our freedom of expression in times of war. Since March 2022, quite a lot of decisions and measures that have been taken (or not taken) by the authorities on the local as well as on the national level have faced a critical response from civil society organisations and activists. Since the possibilities for public gatherings are limited, online petitions and similar measures of civil activism are on the rise.

But physical protests also take place. Let's take recent events in Kyiv as an example. One such event is the public campaign for the preservation of the largest Ukrainian film archive, the Dovzhenko Centre. The Ukrainian State Film Agency's decision to reorganise the Centre (to de facto liquidate it) and systemic abuse of the organisational autonomy of the institution faced strong condemnation from the cultural community and civil society. Dozens of activists attended the protests, despite the air raid warnings. As the situation developed, the demands of the NGOs and cultural activists addressed the lack of competence and general inefficiency of the state policy in the field of culture, which had caused this situation. They not only demanded the preservation of the film archive but also the dismissal of the head of the State Film Agency and the Minister of Culture and Information Policy.

Another example is a public campaign to save a 19th century residential building from demolition, after it had been partly destroyed by a Russian drone in October 2022, killing a number of its inhabitants. The survivors banded together with urban activists to persuade the city authorities to preserve and rebuild the destroyed part of the house, as the building has a historical value. Petitioning and public resistance to demolition have reached new heights and foil the discussion about the adequacy of cultural heritage protection policies and their implementation. The ongoing debate on the urban planning reform recently proposed by the government is no less heated and takes place in a critical atmosphere.

The difficulties with the provision of crisis housing for the people whose homes were damaged by shelling inevitably provokes discussion of Ukraine's current housing policy. Urban activists advocate for the need to create a social housing fund, which did not exist in Ukraine before the war.

All these discussions eventually reach a systemic level: what should be the policies in this or that sphere? Does our society want them to be the same as they were before the war? And what if the challenges we faced during the war force us to rethink something? What if the policies and approaches that were applied before the war did not work? I wonder if there is a space for expressing such constructive criticism. In other words, do civil society actors currently have a real opportunity to question the trajectories of socio-economic development? To demand a fundamentally different housing policy? To advocate for fundamentally different approaches to remuneration for critical infrastructure workers? To propose the development of a complex social policy, which did not exist in the country before the war? I ask myself whether we can demand the impossible when Ukrainians are already doing the impossible: fighting the army of a country ten times larger than ours.

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