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## **Institutional Distrust, Informality, and Civil Society in Ukraine**

*Svitlana Krasynska*

**Abstract:** Informal practices permeate Ukraine's sociopolitical landscape, shaping the country's civil society. While, traditionally, civil society research focuses on the activities of formal organizations, a sizable amount of civic activities in Ukraine occur informally, remaining largely below the radars of empirical research and official statistics. This paper zeros in on the informal side of Ukraine's voluntary sector. More specifically, it investigates Ukrainian society's fundamental distrust of formal institutions that plays a central and dual role in civil society's structures and motivations. On the one hand, institutional distrust functions as civil society's mechanism for resisting formalization processes and creating alternative, informal, institutions; on the other hand, it works as a motivator for civic engagement in response to formal institutions' neglectful and oppressive behaviors. The paper concludes that informality in Ukraine's civil society is expressed as one of the key ingredients in enabling relative autonomy from the distrusted formal institutions.

Informal practices permeate every sphere of post-Soviet societies, often being the key strategy of adaptation and survival in highly volatile and resource-deficient conditions (Stepanenko 2006). Pervasive informality, however, is not visible in most of Ukraine's voluntary sector's existing empirical and official data, which tends to be based largely on information about formal civil society organizations (CSOs). Focusing almost exclusively on formal organizations and their activities, local and comparative studies generally conclude that Ukraine's civil society continues to struggle for various economic, political and societal reasons, leading to citizens' general lack of engagement in CSOs. Ukrainians are not likely to associate through formal organizations to solve their common problems (Gatskova & Gatskov 2015;

Stewart 2009; Anheier 2004) and, “[d]espite the growing numbers of registered [CSOs], few citizens participate, volunteer their time or make donations to [CSOs]” (Lutsevych, 2013, p. 4).

At the same time, Ukrainians consistently partake in civil society outside of formal channels. In 2006, almost half of Ukrainians reported to have provided active support to different causes unrelated to formal CSOs, while only slightly more than eight percent reported volunteering for formal organizations (Kuts & Palyvoda, 2006). The informal manifestations of civil society have been especially evident during the Euromaidan protests, which mobilized millions of Ukrainians in the winter of 2013-14, nearly three quarters of whom had no affiliation with CSOs (Gatskova & Gatskov, 2015). Informal organizing has also been pivotal in the developments of an ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine that have spurred an unprecedented wave of predominantly grassroots voluntary engagement, popularly termed as the “volunteer movement.” Notably, the national sociological polls, when soliciting perceptions of trust in various social institutions, separate these volunteer activities from the activities of CSOs, with volunteer groups consistently garnering higher levels of public trust than the CSOs (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2017).

While the “Contemporary civil society discourse [in Ukraine] ... overcomes the simplified view of itself as of merely the activity of a network of nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and associations” (Stepanenko 2015, p. 89), scholarly literature on the informal side of Ukraine’s civil society is fragmented and exceedingly limited. This paper is part of a larger study that broadly investigates the nature, drivers, and impact of civil society’s informal practices and institutions. In the following pages, I zero in on Ukrainian citizens’ pervasive distrust of formal institutions as one of the roots of pervasive informality in the sector. Particularly, I address the following research question: What role does distrust of formal

institutions play in civil society's structures and motivations in Ukraine? While addressing this question, I also begin to ponder more broadly about what pervasive informality means for civic engagement and democracy in this post-Soviet context.

This paper is organized as follows. It first presents an overview of scholarly literature on two types of institutional distrust relevant for civil society: the distrust of the government, and the less discussed in the literature yet consequential distrust of formal CSOs; it also reviews literature on particularized trust, a component of civil society that provides an antidote to the pervasive institutional distrust. The paper then briefly notes on the study's methodology and limitations. My discussion of empirical findings that follows reveals how the pervasive distrust of the government and formal nonprofit organizations plays a central and dual role in civil society's structures and motivations. On the one hand, institutional distrust functions as civil society's mechanism for resisting formalization processes and for creating alternative, informal institutions. On the other hand, it works as a direct motivator for civic engagement in response to formal institutions' neglectful or repressive behaviors. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the overall effects of institutional distrust and pervasive informality on the nature and efficacy of civil society in Ukraine.

### **Background**

The combination of Ukrainian citizens' pervasive distrust of the government and the prevalence of informality in society comes as no surprise, as the two concepts are highly related (Elgin & kadir Tosun 2017). In Ukraine, nearly half of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) is produced in the informal sector, while public trust in governmental institutions has been persistently low since the country gained independence (Schneider & Buehn 2018, p. 2; Transparency International 2016; Zmerli 2012, p. 120). Particularly, Ukraine's President, the

National Government, and the Parliament generate the lowest levels of trust and the highest levels of distrust in the Ukrainian polity – between 5 and 13 percent of Ukrainians reported to trust these institutions, and between 69 and 82 percent reported to distrust them (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2017). Public trust in the judiciary and the prosecutor's office is also low in Ukraine – with just over 10 percent trusting and 83 percent distrusting the former, and less than 10 percent trusting and 84 percent distrusting the latter (Razumkov Centre 2016, p. 2). What are some of the underpinnings of public distrust in governmental institutions?

Institutional trust has varied dimensions, and different governmental agencies garner levels of public trust according to their performance, especially in the postcommunist Eastern Europe (Miller, Grødeland & Koshechkina, 2001). Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies (2015) suggest that the nature of public trust in governmental institutions has three distinct dimensions: perceived competence, benevolence, and integrity.

While public trust varies between different governmental agencies and their functions, there are two additional dimensions of trust in governmental institutions: a *wholesale* trust, stemming from systemic issues, such as income inequality, and a *retail* trust related to citizens' experience in dealing with specific public agencies (Kettl 2018; Uslaner & Brown 2005). In addition to the persistent economic hardships experienced by Ukrainians in the past two and a half decades of independence, exacerbating wholesale distrust, negative experiences dealing with habitually unfair and unnecessary bureaucracy negatively affect the retail trust. Table 1 illustrates the three dimensions of wholesale and retail trust as applied to the Ukrainian context.

**Table 1. Expressions and Dimensions of Distrust of the Government**

	Competence	Benevolence	Integrity
<i>Wholesale</i>	Neglect of responsibility	Abuse of power	Systemic corruption
<i>Retail</i>	Inefficiency	Excessive bureaucracy	Petty corruption

Source: Adapted from Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies 2015; Kettl 2018; Uslaner & Brown 2005.

Political and administrative corruption is found to be “associated with less satisfaction, lower levels of social and institutional trust, and a greater willingness to break rules,” while damaging “the legitimacy of government in the eyes of citizens...” (Villoria, Van Ryzin & Lavena, 2013, p. 85). At the same time, civil society’s strides to fight corruption by exposing it, can have harmful effects on public trust, causing a vicious cycle of citizen dissociation: “an increase in transparency in highly corrupt countries tends to breed resignation rather than indignation” (Bauhr & Grimes 2014, p. 291). While “transparency is an essential precondition for accountability more generally,” anti-corruption initiatives aimed at increasing transparency can “reveal improper or illegal government practices and potentially erode institutional confidence and citizens’ willingness to engage in the individual or collective actions needed to bring about the kind of gradual improvements hoped for ” (Ibid., p. 309).

Corrupt and dysfunctional public institutions, fracture trust and alienate citizens, propagating and reinforcing informal institutions. Ukraine’s higher education system, which is largely state-owned, is a fitting example. Polese et al. (2018) find: “A dysfunctional higher education sector erodes state legitimacy and runs the risk of alienating even more the state from its citizens. ... the primary issue is not informality per se, but alienation and lack of interaction between those who should contribute to the state and the state itself” (p. 493). In Ukraine, people generally tend to strive for limited contact with state institutions and pay as few taxes as possible to a government that provides limited protection (Kuzio 2012, p. 430). Furthermore,

“Ukrainians’ trust in their state to do what is right as well as to fulfill its obligations as citizens ... were [found to be] almost nonexistent” (Berenson 2010, p. 214). Ukraine’s CSO sector is not an exception from this general rule, as it appears to be largely unaffected by and live in a parallel universe with governmental institutions in many of its activities (Krasynska 2015).

Levels of trust of the government does not only dictate whether citizens will participate in public processes, but also how they will do so. In the United States, different types of civic participation are predicated on the levels of trust in governmental institutions (Lee & Schachter 2018). In Ukraine, there is: “a negative association between support for democracy and political trust in Ukraine: people supporting democracy [are] less likely to support incumbent authorities” (Johnson 2005, p. 80). Because trust in Ukrainian state institutions is so low, people are more likely to trust foreign-imported reformers than their home-grown ones in the ongoing reform processes (Aliyev 2017, p. 172). What is more, there is a widespread informal participation by foreign and domestic specialists in Ukraine’s governmental agencies: “Many private advisers prefer to remain informal rather than taking permanent jobs, creating an entire class of informal policymakers who function outside and beyond the formal institutional framework” (Ibid.).

Public distrust of the government also spills over to other formal institutions, including formal CSO sector. This is not unique to Ukraine, as trust in government generally correlates with confidence in “charitable organizations and humanitarian organizations” (Bekkers et al. 2018, p. 1194), both on macro and micro levels (p. 1195).

Levels of public trust in Ukraine’s civic organizations (associated usually with formally registered groups) are higher than levels of trust in governmental institutions (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2017). Nevertheless, civic associations, or CSOs, are trusted far less than the “volunteers” (a concept associated with predominantly informal, participatory groups and

initiatives, especially those aiding the Ukrainian army, the victims of war in Eastern Ukraine and Crimean refugees). The very notion that “volunteers” and “civic organizations” appear separately in the sociological surveys speaks volumes about public perceptions of the difference between the two types of civic engagement. The balance of trust and distrust, as expressed by Ukrainians, is different for “volunteers” compared with formal “civic organizations”: with 54 percent of population reporting to trust volunteers and 20 percent reporting to distrust them; and 37 percent trusting civic associations and 25 distrusting them (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2017).

What causes individuals to distrust CSOs? In the United States, public trust in nonprofits is threatened by four sets of factors, including “mission vagueness,” lack of accountability, misconception of the sector, and value rift (Schlesinger’s et al. 2004, pp. 674-5). In an international context, Bekkers et al. (2018) identify “three failures” of nonprofit organizations that compromise public trust in the sector, including “(1) amateurism, (2) over-exclusion, and (3) *asymmetry of information* – lack of transparency, the potential for fraud, and violation of the non-distribution constraint...” (p. 1186, emphasis in the original). Negative perceptions of the sector also have various specific causes, including media’s attention to scandal, friends’ and family’s negative experience or insider knowledge, CSOs’ deviant behavior, lack of efficiency, and abuse and wastefulness in charitable funds’ expenditures (Bekkers et al. 2018, pp. 1191-2).

Public trust compromised by scandals in the nonprofit sector has been discussed widely in the literature (Hyndman & McConville 2018; Tremblay-Boire, Prakash & Gugerty 2016; Zack 2003; Rose-Ackerman 2001). Eng et al. (2018) consider deviant behavior of both “mainstream” nonprofits and of the “fundamentally deviant” organizations (p. 1331), to define its range in the sector, as follows:

We differentiate *crime* (violating laws) from legal but unethical conduct (deviating from strict rules that are not laws), which we term *misconduct*. We also refer to *dysfunction*, which refers to conduct that deviates from milder rules, seldom punished, and seen as *tolerable deviance*. (p. 1332, emphasis in original)

A range of CSOs' deviant behavior was found as an especially widespread phenomenon in Ukraine, compromising the public perception and the reputation of formal organizations, as illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2. Expressions and Dimensions of Distrust of Formal CSOs**

<b>Crime</b>	<b>Misconduct</b>	<b>Deviancy</b>
Embezzlement	Ties to commercial interests	Abuse of institutional grants
Corruption	Partisan politics in disguise	Mismanagement of funds

Source: Adapted from Eng et al. 2018.

On the backdrop of the pervasive distrust of formal institutions, whom do Ukrainians trust, and how does such trust effect their civic engagement? In Ukraine's society, particularized trust (trust of friends and family members) is significantly higher than the generalized trust (trust of people in general and of strangers). Whereas trust of people in general fares just above 6 points (on a 10-point scale) and trust of strangers – slightly above 3 percent, trust of family members receives almost a perfect score of 9.5 points, and trust of friends – just over 8 points. Trust in colleagues, on the other hand, is close to trust of people in general – 6.6 percent (Paniotto & Kharchenko 2017).

Community-centered culture, infused with particularized trust, can foster civic participation; however, such participation is often focused on resolving issues that are of importance to familiar individuals and communities. These activities run the risk of occurring at the expense of helping people in general, including strangers: “People who stick to their own

kind are likely to be wary of strangers. They will not take the risks involved in trusting people they do not know” (Uslaner & Conley 2003, p. 333).

Thus, the prevalence of particularized trust is a double-edged sword: “Particularized trusters have deeper connections with their social circles, but generalized trusters with weak ties may experience greater payoffs” (Ibid., p. 335). Furthermore, “Particularized trusters will shy away from wide-ranging civic engagement. They are likely to see the world in terms of *we* and *they*” (Uslaner & Conley 2003, p. 335), which tends to prevent from further consolidation of society. The Ukrainian case suggests that the prevalence of particularized trust (at the expense of more widespread generalized trust) can be both a powerful tool for mobilizing on the local levels, and, at times of crisis, on a national level (such as during popular protests); however, at the same time, it also tends to fracture society and even propel radical agendas.

### **Methods**

This paper draws largely on data derived from 70 interviews with individuals involved in informal initiatives of Ukraine’s civil society, highlighting the importance of individual “perspectives of those being studied” (Merriam 2009, p. 1). Study participants included predominantly leaders of civil society initiatives, groups and organizations that were at least to some degree unregulated by the Ukrainian government (however, in most cases, they operated largely or exclusively on an informal basis). Several Ukrainian scholars were also interviewed for a broader understanding of the informal voluntary sector dynamics. An interview guide was used to direct the semi-structured conversations with participants, encompassing both exploratory and confirmatory inquiry approaches. Most of the interviewees discussed in their own words the nature and scope of their civic activities, their reasons for operating informally, as well as the nature of their interactions with other stakeholders in the polity. Social media

content, along with a variety of secondary data sources, were used to triangulate the interview data. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in their original languages for analysis. Sixty-three transcribed interviews, as well as field notes and follow-up electronic correspondence (a total of 82 documents), were analyzed using NVivo software.

Certain factors limit the external validity and generalizability of the study's findings; however, these limitations potentially are outweighed by the study's unique strengths. First, while the study purposely diversified its sample in terms of the types of civic initiatives, their geographic locations, and levels of institutionalization, nevertheless, it is based primarily on the experiences, perceptions and opinions conveyed by civil society stakeholders who led their initiatives predominantly on an informal basis. Secondly, because currently there are no comprehensive data available on the informal groups, organizations and initiatives in Ukraine, obtaining a representative sample was not possible in this research, limiting the generalizability of the study's findings. At the same time, generalizability may not be requisite for expanding our qualitative understanding of a complex social phenomenon of informal civic engagement in Ukraine.

### **Findings**

Throughout dozens of interviews, distrust of the government featured prominently both as a propellant of informality, as well as impetus for civic engagement. It was echoed by the distrust of formal CSOs, which buttressed preferences of informal engagement. Trust in informal relations, and trust stemming from prior experience and informal reputations, on the other hand, contrasted with institutional distrust, prompting the creation of informal groups and initiatives.

## **Distrust of the Government**

Public distrust in governmental institutions prompts a range of responses within Ukrainian polity – from dissociation and apathy to the emergence of institutions that are alternative to the state. Institutional distrust that stems from the state’s neglect of its essential guarantees and its abuse of power encourages informal practices, resulting also in two interrelated types of civic activities.

First, the government is perceived to massively fail at providing the essential social protections, compelling society to fill the gap in state’s service provision by creating service-focused initiatives. Such initiatives often remain informal and situational, especially when the state has a sole responsibility for providing the very services rendered by these groups. Second, the government is perceived as abusing its power, while placing government representatives’ mercantile interests over those of the public. Civil society intervenes to limit such abuses by creating advocacy-focused initiatives. These initiatives, likewise, often emerge informally and remain fluid and unofficial for various reasons, not the least of which is their antagonistic relationship with the authorities. At the same time, since the two governmental failures (neglect, and abuse of power) go hand-in-hand, civil society actors often engage in both service and advocacy functions interchangeably.

*Neglect of responsibility.* One of the reasons reported by the respondents for becoming involved in their activities was Ukrainian government’s inability or unwillingness to fulfil its essential guarantees. Had the government fulfilled its duties, respondents observed, there would have been no need for their particular voluntary activity. When adapting Helmke & Levitsky’s (2004) typology of interaction between formal and informal institutions to formal state-informal civil society interaction, this dynamic points to civil society’s substitutive function, where

informal institutions (in this case, of civil society) substitute the state in the context of ineffective formal institutions and convergent objectives. Civil society actors are often aware of this dynamic, discussing it rather poignantly:

R51: Essentially, what do the activists do? They supplement, and in a way substitute the government. And what happens? With such an enormous level of ruin and chaos, the activists essentially adopt [the government's] role ... taking upon themselves a part of the functions that the government is supposed to fulfill.

R67: I am simply managing this project, managing the suppliers, instead of the city administration, which in the perfect world should be doing it in the first place. However, since it simply does not have people who are capable of doing this at the moment, and the mayor and a couple of other people are just unavailable to do it, then these issues fall into my hands.

There is a prevailing sentiment that it is more sensible to rely on government's failing at fulfilling its duties, than expecting the government to deliver on them, with some respondents reflecting, rather grimly [R23]: "Our government takes responsibility for nothing." While, on the one hand, government's dysfunction prompts disillusionment and disassociation, on the other hand, it fosters eagerness to roll up the sleeves and resolve the issues independently, instead of expending seemingly futile attempts on keeping the government accountable. Numerous respondents expressed their attitudes along the following lines:

R14: Our association emerged from the homeowners' understanding that the government, the city administration, will do nothing, so we have to do this ourselves. ... How can we expect anything from the government? ... I can go with the fists and demand: dear mayor, let us fix this... The answer will be the same: there are many of you, but not enough money.

R5: So many people, [WWII] heroes, pensioners, it is terrifying how they live. The government does not care about them, so we have to care for them. We have to change all this, there has to be some semblance of fairness. That is why we have to be what we are. If you cannot change this world with weapons, then you have to go and do as you see best.

Thus, government's neglect of its responsibilities, and the resulting alienation from society, prompts not only apathy but also self-organization. Sometimes, however, the latter functions in parallel or in competition with the state. This echoes the side of Helmke & Levitsky's (2004) model, in which informal institutions have a competing function in the context of ineffective formal institutions but divergent objectives.

Informal civic practices further complicate society's sentiments around tax compliance, legitimizing preferences for informal structures. Civil society actors expect to be fully exempt from taxes on their activities, believing they are providing vital services for which, technically, taxes have already been paid to the government. One respondent, for example, expressed this rather popular sentiment:

R63: And, at any moment, the tax office can ask us: "Hey, where is our 17 percent?" ... I will not have the money to pay these taxes, and do not consider it sensible to pay. Essentially, we do what the government is supposed to be doing. People pay taxes to the government so that something is done for that money. In other words, the government took the taxes and [provided the services]. People have paid the second round of taxes when they transferred their money onto our volunteer group's bank card. So, then, we would have to pay taxes on the same money for the third time... The reality is that there is still no formal regulation for the situation we have on our hands.

Civil society actors often do not trust to be treated fairly and equitably by the government if their donations are reported and formalized. Keeping financials below the official radars is maintaining them intact and free for use towards achieving programmatic goals. Thus, the line between government's neglect and its perceived pervasive abuse of power is blurred.

*Abuse of power.* The distrust of the government, stemming from the perceived institutionalized abuse of power, was described in a variety of settings throughout the interviews: from local administrations in rural communities to the national government. The perceived corruption within the judiciary and the selective justice methods, for instance, was mentioned as

posing direct threat to civil society actors, especially to volunteers aiding the Ukrainian army.

This heightens a sense of distrust. A respondent conveyed, reflecting on the efficacy of the post-Euromaidan judicial reforms:

R12 (2): And what happens in courts is a calamity. Even how they were prosecuting that volunteer. The same judge who was prosecuting the Maidan activists, the same judge was prosecuting [the volunteer], you understand? That is the biggest problem that there was no judiciary reform, the law enforcement system presumably changed, but nothing really changed, money did and does decide.

Abuse of state power occurs on the national as well as local levels. A respondent leading a registered, but largely informally-run, organization expressed her dismay at dealing with the government after applying for a small grant with the local government and later being requested to “kick back” part of that grant to the governmental official in cash: (R9) “To be honest, we cannot hope for any help from the government. There was an incident when they said: we will help you with X amount, but you have to give 30 percent of it back in cash.” The respondent, understandably, refused such a “grant,” refraining from further cooperation with the governmental agency. Although this is but one example, it speaks to a larger issue fomenting distrust in the government, prompting advocacy initiatives to combat such abuses.

When discussing the Ukrainian government, the interviewees conflated the government and oligarchs, and there is abundant literature on the topic of oligarch’s influence on the country’s politics, shadow economy, and democracy (Pleines 2016; Åslund 2014). A respondent voiced the ethos (R11): “This is our transparency. Nothing changed in essence, the oligarchs are in power, they do everything to preserve their positions, they got into power the same way as their predecessors. And they, all together, are stealing and lying.”

Immediately after the 2013-14 Euromaidan, many political powers backed by the oligarchs have adopted an unspoken requisite of including volunteer movement activists in their

party lists in order to boost legitimacy, thus further blurring the boundaries between the government, business, and civil society (Minakov 2015). This dynamic, while, arguably, having a positive, trust-boosting effect on the political parties, also had a negative effect on the general trust in civil society, portraying activists as “sell-outs” and no longer independent actors. Two respondents in a joint interview conveyed this illustratively:

R20: (first respondent) You are omitting an important aspect. The [name of oligarch]’s team made a big mistake. After a few months of working with unruly volunteers, they got tired of volunteers kicking down their doors, they wanted greater loyalty. And what do you need to get more loyalty from people? Give them a salary. This is when the volunteer environment became segmented. ... Essentially, they have destroyed the [volunteer] movement. ... (second respondent) When an individual is looking at this [work] as a means of getting richer, then of course she will not say [to the boss]: “you are wrong.” She will not defend her position. Before, everyone could take part in deliberation, and at one point it worked powerfully and very well.

At the same time, activists, especially those combating corruption, have been experiencing various pushbacks from the government: both formally, by attempts to curb their activities legislatively (Ravchev 2018; Lyakh 2012), to condoning, or ignoring, physical violence against them. The recent gruesome murder of anti-corruption activist, Kateryna Handzyuk (Roth 2018), and the investigation efforts that were perceived by the activist community as slack, is illustrative of the state of affairs, with Handzyuk herself summing the situation up in an interview shortly before her death: “Yes, I look bad now, but I’m being cured by good, Ukrainian doctors. And I know this: I look a lot better than the state of Ukrainian fairness and justice today” (Carroll 2018).

While the outcomes of the 2013-14 Euromaidan have generated some optimism regarding future democratic development, the outcomes of the post-Maidan reforms have not received the same level of enthusiasm, further exacerbating distrust of the government: “Low levels of public trust in the reform process and limited satisfaction with its effectiveness are

coupled with the slow practical application of reforms and their relatively low efficiency” (Aliyev 2017, p. 170).

Many activists who have joined governmental agencies with the hopes of instituting change from within have been disillusioned and left their official engagements, often disgruntled. A respondent residing in a city where many revolution activists have joined local governmental agencies, reported:

R18: In [our city] things were not always so peaceful, things were actually rather brutal [during Euromaidan]. Later, when they [politicians in power before the revolution] were removed, and the same functionaries remained at the helm, ... – the fat cats, the same old party establishment – when people saw all this, there was a big disappointment factor. ... And many volunteers, those who joined [the government], people who were actually doing something... Many people became corrupt, those whom this system chewed up and spat out, and many left because they just lost hope.

Thus, governmental systems remain generally impenetrable for civil society, despite the momentary gains of Euromaidan, as reported by multiple study respondents. It, therefore, appears more sensible to work against the system than within it. A respondent illustrated:

R60: There is such a dead end there [inside the government], everything is so divvied up, that I do not even know how to move that mountain. You really need to bang your head against the wall, and the most important thing is for the people who are truly ready to deal with it, to have enough enthusiasm. A person comes in there and understands that he will be forced out of there, up to the actual physical annihilation, or he has to live by their laws, by the laws of our city administration.

While there are gradual improvements, the propensity of distrust of governmental institutions persist and informality will, for the foreseeable future, remain a popular choice, as expressed by a respondent:

R28: Generally, I see by our guys and by other acquaintances that right now all this informal activity is very popular. Because to deal with the government... In general, it is getting better, but there are still problems. Because the government, no matter what, looks at the civic sector with arrogance, tries to control it, when there are joint projects.

## Distrust of CSOs

The majority of individuals interviewed in the course of this study expressed their distrust in at least some types of official CSOs, stemming predominantly from three specific types of problematic behavior. These include abuse of institutional grants systems, dependence to the point of fusion with governmental actors, and fraudulent fiscal practices.

*The grant-eaters.* While many organizations receiving institutional grants in Ukraine conduct their activities transparently, contributing to society in a variety of meaningful ways, the disreputable organizations were reported to have the effect of rotting apples spoiling the bunch. Aside from reportedly misusing the grant funds, such organizations also were reported to create an undue competition for grant resources, especially for the newcomer organizations that were less familiar with these systems. An activist spoke from her experience:

R17: There are organizations that make a living from grants. They receive a grant, cash it out, provide some sort of papers [as proof of programmatic outputs], and then the money disappears. In other words, in effect, they do nothing. ... Sometimes a new civic organization attempts to get in on the grant process, and it is literally being forced out by all means possible because it is a very lucrative field. So, from the point of view of a regular person, if you need a stamp of approval that you are a member of some civic association, you can find an already existing organization founded by your acquaintances and “join” it. But if you want to receive grants, then you have to prepare yourself for battles with these old organizations, and go through [hell and back] doing that. However, if you lead a sufficiently transparent accounting, and provide adequate reporting, then you can effectively collect charitable donations [without an official CSO].

Foreign grant program abuses foster inequality in the sector, and “More inequality leads to less trust” (Uslaner & Brown 2005, p 888). The majority, if not all, of the activists participating in this study conveyed their rather self-sacrificing attitudes, expending often highly scarce resources towards achieving their altruistic missions. One informal but influential suburban community leader expressed: “I have been living on the verge of begging on the streets for years, but I cannot stop. I live and breathe by this work.” On this backdrop, reports of lavish

lifestyles exhibited by employees of certain institutionally-funded organizations were reported to be especially disheartening for the grassroots groups. An activist posted on Facebook (December 2, 2016): “It is sickening for me to hear of civic activists in Ukraine ordering Omar lobsters for the grant money, while we are trying to save money on paper.” These occurrences tend to negatively affect the perception of the formal side of the civil society sector, exacerbating dissociation, thus echoing the notion of institutional *wholesale* distrust in formal institutions mentioned earlier (Uslaner & Brown 2005). A respondent, whose charitable activity has been completely under the official radars at the time of my fieldwork, confirmed:

R60: I do not trust [formal] charitable foundations, honestly. ... When I see their report about a [Christmas] party they organized in an orphanage and then a party for their employees, and it was such dramatic contrast that you cannot help but have questions.

The perception of ineffective use of funds is intensified by the popular perception that these official, grant-receiving organizations frequently demonstrate insignificant results of their activity, if any at all. This may be at least partially due to their lack of transparent reporting. A respondent who is a member of several informal groups and initiatives in her community, reported:

R35: And then [the city administration] reports that they gave grants to 10 organizations. But I will tell you that these are organizations that just receive money for whatever they are doing already [instead of specific projects for which these grants are designed]. What specifically they are doing I do not even know. ... Their effectiveness is dismal.

On this background, nonprofit institutionalization itself is being questioned by those supporting civil society financially. While some activists, especially those familiar with the formal third sector environment, understand the role of institutionalization for sustainability, a perception that a paid salary is an indicator of dubious motives for civic activity was rather pervasive among the grassroots activists. A respondent stated: [R12] “These charitable

foundations that walk around with donation boxes, they receive salaries. Even those who walk around collecting this money, and those who sit in offices, they also get salaries from this very money. What kind of charitable organization is it if he walks around with a box and receives money for it?" This dynamic also has been observed in other contexts (Fiorillo, 2011).

*Not-so-nongovernmental.* Another problematic trend for the reputation of the official CSO sector is the preponderance of organizations that are inextricably tied to the governmental institutions, political parties, or specific officials. These linkages to the government may take a form of official governmental grants awarded in non-transparent ways, or even an informal distribution of resources (under the table) based on familiar connections. Such organizations generally are not perceived as independent and are treated with high levels of distrust and apprehension. Thus, respondents suggested, there are numerous civic associations and charitable foundations that are *nongovernmental* in name only. These organizations can be founded for deliberate political purposes, such as candidate endorsement, or even for malfeasant fiscal practices by elected politicians. While, officially, these organizations are nongovernmental entities organized for public benefit, in essence, they are founded, financed and controlled by political figures with dubious aims. A respondent conveyed a perception which was expressed by over a dozen different respondents:

R48: During those times, when it was relatively easy to found a civic organization, in the 90s and 00s, many organizations were launched. Right now, there are about 70 registered in our city. Many of them are organized on dubious principles, with unclear and indiscernible goals. Mainly, these are pro-political organizations that were created for the elections or in parallel with a political cell. ... But, in reality, it is a classic milking of the electorate at the expense of the civic sector. Organizations avoid these [people] at all cost and do not engage with them. I, for one, would not even shake hands with those people. There is a host of such organizations – created for political purposes, or some event, but they provide absolutely nothing.

Thus, distrust of the formal side of the civil society sector is especially intensified by the distrust of government when the two sectors are conflated. The use of civil society organizations for political purposes is, of course, not unique to Ukraine and the question regarding political parties and their inclusion into the purview of civil society is debated in scholarly literature (Edwards 2014, p. 24). What distinguishes the organizations discussed here from the political organizations in general is their duplicitous intentions: while they publically proclaim to be civic associations organized for public benefit purposes, in actuality, they are entirely funded and controlled by select politicians. One respondent suggested:

R59: They become active only before the elections ... at once a bunch of civic associations will emerge. They will be playing the circus of democracy, things like that, some sort of games that they are on the side of the people. But, in reality, nobody really is, people are forced to [fend for themselves]...

*Fiscal malfeasance.* Finally, certain CSOs were reported to engage in outright illegal financial activities. These activities especially tarnish the public trust in formal civic associational activities. A respondent conveyed a general distrust of those organizations with which she did not have previous experience or a personal relationship:

R1: On top of it all, there are many con artists. On the background [of the war], and the many charitable organizations, a lot of money is being collected and they go nowhere. ... By the way, there is much more trust in unofficial groups. ... [For instance,] I walk on the street and individuals are standing there collecting money. I know that they are officially registered voluntary organizations that collect money for the war effort and for the sick children. They collect the money but I will give them nothing. I do not trust them, I know that every other one of them can be a con artist.

In sum, institutional distrust is pervasive among Ukrainians, spanning beyond the distrust of governmental institutions. The formal institutions of civil society are, likewise, affected by institutional distrust, unwittingly helping create alternative, informal institutions. A respondent expressed the following, leading to the next point in the ongoing discussion – the notion of particularized trust:

R65: Generally, however, for the most part, everything is based on personal relationships. ... I know that, as a mother or a wife of a soldier, I will never take a penny for myself. Otherwise, the level of trust to charitable organizations is very low. But if people know personally either the leaders, or activists and volunteers of this organization, and they see exactly where the money goes, they have transparent accounting, transparent reporting, then everything is okay and works like a clock.

### **What About Trust?**

Trust is vital for civil society and mutual cooperation. It is an essential ingredient in charitable giving and acts of benevolence, Uslander & Brown (2005) find:

We considered a range of possible predictors for charitable donations, but none other than trust levels proved significant (not even church affiliation). ... The powerful impact of trust suggests that it is central to good deeds. We find no corresponding reciprocal effect in the aggregate models for communal activities on trust. These models suggest a one-way pattern of influence from trust to good works... Where there is less trust, there are fewer acts of kindness toward others. (p. 888).

In the chaotic and unpredictable environment, in which there is little reliance on and high levels of distrust in formal institutions, the ability to navigate neglectful or oppressive systems via informal relationships promotes a sense of agency and a modicum of control. Because there are few reliable mechanisms available to the voluntary sector to counteract the various abuses by formal institutions, activists tend to rely on alternative institutions that are grounded in personal relationships and informal reputations. The expressions and dimensions of particularized trust, discussed further, are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4. Expressions and Dimensions of Particularized Trust**

<b>Trust in personal relations</b>	<b>Trust based on informal reputations</b>
Friends and family	Efficiency, results
Friends and family of friends and family	Transparent reporting
Personal endorsement	Joint experience during crisis

Networks of friends, acquaintances, and neighbors – as expressed by a popular Ukrainian expression *vci choi [vsi svoi]* (translated, literally, as “everyone is ours” and signifying, when stated, that people in the present company can be generally trusted) – are based in particularized trust and are at the heart of informal civil society’s activities. The “good deeds” can, thus, occur outside of formal institutions’ constraints and within the comfort and security of informal networks. These networks can be small and intimate, as well as large and extended, and are often amplified with the help of social media.

In the context of adverse economic conditions, sociopolitical instability, and the insufficient regulatory and law enforcement protection, a personal knowledge of individuals who participate and make financial contributions to a cause is of similar importance as familiarity with those for whom the aid is intended. Two respondents reported, rather illustratively of many other initiatives, on how their groups supplying the army in the Eastern Ukraine, for instance, had launched their programming:

R19: We decided right away that it will be a targeted help to our acquaintances, because there were quite a few of them and these are the people whom we trusted. We knew that if they said they needed it, then it is essential and it will be disbursed properly.

R12: How did this volunteer movement emerge? To help your friends, friends of friends. ... It is all on the level of: I know Ivan, Ivan knows Stepan...

Trust of familiar relations can also serve as a substitute for formalization. Since formalization is often associated with regulation and institutional funding, grassroots groups based on personal networks, especially those with no aspiration for foundation or government grants, do not seek or even report a need for an official status – all the guarantees and protection they need are grounded in the personal trust of their stakeholders. Thus, informality, based in particularized trust, appears to be a default arrangement, with formalization being discussed

usually when external motivators (such as a potential institutional grant, or registration requirement for participation in city council meetings) are present. A respondent illustrated:

[R6] [SK: Would having an official organization provide any benefits, in terms of money or volunteers?] No, absolutely not. Because our donations come only from our close relations, acquaintances, companies where we work, and everything is based exclusively on trust.

How do civil society actors expand the radius of trust within their networks in the environment where generalized trust is scarce? Networks and alliances emerge and transform in the course of various civic activities. Volunteering for common goals – either jointly, or in parallel with others – also builds informal reputations in the sector, expanding the radius of trust necessary for engaging greater constituencies. Bekkers et al. (2018) highlight positive mass media coverage of the nonprofit sector activities, positive experiences of individuals or their peers, as well as high effectiveness of specific organizations as causes of positive nonprofit sector perceptions (pp. 1192). These factors directly apply to the informal side of the sector, where prior joint experience, positive coverage on social media and in other informal forms of communication, as well as personal endorsements by those within one's familiar networks, are pivotal for further engagement. In addition to the above, several trust-building tactics were reported in the interviews. These revolved largely around producing quality results, and then reporting them transparently to the constituents.

Various respondents have expressed that trust in their initiatives primarily rested on their ability to get the job done well and on time. This was often contrasted with the stories of public relations campaigns of well-funded CSOs and political establishments that, reportedly, generated publicity but had few outcomes with which to back their campaign slogans. For informal civil society groups, it was actions – not words – that propelled reputations. Either in small communities, where their activities are highly visible, or with the emergence of social media,

where information spreads quickly, the earned reputations are vital for the activity's survival. A respondent attested:

R53: And here things are obvious, we always appealed to people's judgement based on actions, not words. If a group is organized for legitimate purposes, addressing important issues, and is really combating corruption and evil, that is an indicator and that is how it builds people's trust. But when an organization begins engaging in some dubious activity, begins doing questionable things, then it indicates that somebody paid them to do it. Then it does not matter how much they try to assert that they are a cool organization – people see [their actions].

Informal reputations are especially dependent on honest fiscal practices and transparency.

Study respondents discussed this at length, as summed up by a volunteer who ran a small operation supporting internally-displaced persons (IDPs) from Eastern Ukraine: [R19] “And, after all, reporting [is key] – whether it is present or not, and how regularly it is being posted.”

Once the reputation is cemented, however, and trust is established, constituents then begin relating similarly as to those within the familiar networks, stated one respondent:

R29: There were several people, local businessmen, telling me: “[Oksana],<sup>1</sup> I can send you 5,000 Hryvnya's a month, if you need.” And all of that was based on trust, yes. They checked me for a while, but now: “If you need anything, just call.”

Such unwritten, but commonly understood reporting requirement has given rise to an informal institution of self-regulation within the sector. Organizations and initiatives, especially those that do not report their financial activity to the government, often conduct extensive informal accounting for the resources received and disbursed in the course of their programming.

A respondent leading an unregistered organization described this phenomenon:

R1: I have been personally conducting all accounting for two years. ... I receive all donations with signatures [in an accounting book]. They give me the money, I keep it, and then we buy what is needed. ... I have a list of all receipts and at every meeting I come with the financial report and all the receipts. I report how the money was spent. Sometimes there are no receipts [items purchased for cash]

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym is used here to protect respondent's confidentiality.

... The [members], for the most part, understand how much these things should cost. ... Besides, I never do this alone—we have two-three-four people who were elected, and everyone essentially trusts us. We, on our part, if there are no receipts, do the best we can not to make these purchases alone, so there are witnesses of how we spent the money. Then we make a report, and everyone is given the report to stay informed.

Registered organizations that conduct a significant portion of their activities informally may have alternative accounting and reporting systems that are not revealed to the government.

A respondent who spoke on behalf of a registered organization that conducted the vast majority of its activity unofficially, conveyed:

R12: For ourselves, we have special notebooks. ... Ivanov Ivan Ivanovich gave us €1,000, and we write down how this money was spent, for instance, on petrol. And then we attach the receipt, for ourselves. [SK: So, this is your own accounting and you do not declare this officially? ... and, officially, this contribution does not exist?] –No, it does not. This is my personal initiative.

The programmatic activity is also being meticulously reported to the constituents, mainly via the channels of social media (one respondent also mentioned reporting informal activity in the local newspaper). Lists of donation amounts and photographs of in-kind contributions are regularly posted on Facebook and other similar social media outlets. Then, photographs of supplies purchased and later received by the intended recipients are subsequently posted on social media as proof that the resources were properly disbursed. This practice was reported as being implicitly required among the participants in the sector and confirmed with massive amounts of social media content.

Trust in third party organizations also can be established through informal endorsements from friends and acquaintances who either have a direct connection to the organization or have an acquaintance associated with it in some way. This type of “transferred” trust was especially evident during the arrangement and completing of this study’s interviews. Several respondents stated during their interviews that they knew they could speak with me earnestly because their

friend or acquaintance (our mutual point of contact) had ensured them I could be trusted. When such connections or endorsements were not as strong, the dynamics of interviews were negatively affected. A similar process works for civil society. One respondent illustrated this kind of prerequisite when deciding whether to support an existing organization in its activities:

R17: I did it this way to begin [helping friends and acquaintances], but then some organizations whom I did not know personally, I knew nobody, but they constantly reported, showed evidence [of their activity]. Then, again, through some acquaintances ... who could verify whether [information that these organizations post on social media] is true. And, if it looks good, then you could cooperate with them.

Finally, going through situations of crisis together was reported as a tremendous trust-building experience with lasting consequences. Many of the study respondents took an active part in the 2013-14 Euromaidan, at times risking their safety and lives in the course of the protests. Alliances built during the revolution, expanded many of the existing networks and subsequently planted the seeds of further association in other civic initiatives. A respondent elaborated:

R20: And this is the thing that, clearly, is impossible with a larger number of participants. The more participants, the more the boundaries of trust are blurred. Because we went through some very difficult things together, like during Maidan, and we trust each other like we would trust ourselves. This is probably similar to being veterans of war.

To recap, the distrust of governmental institutions and formal CSOs act as detractors from formal processes and institutions, as well as motivators for civic engagement. Through informal connections, civil society actors associate with others based the preexisting trust as well as through espousing financial independence, effectiveness, and transparency.

## Implications

What does the prevalence of informality mean for Ukraine's civil society? What does informal civil society accomplish, and, how, if at all, does it contribute to democracy?

Being characteristically outcome-driven, civil society groups and initiatives use informality as one of the tools available in their often scarcely filled toolkits – tools designed to achieve common goals as efficiently and effectively as possible, given the circumstances. The outcomes achieved by the informal civil society may or may not be sustainable over the long-term, or be far-reaching or even visible to the naked eye; they do, however, create a rich yet largely unobserved tapestry in Ukraine's society that is popularly characterized as apathetic, unengaged, and weak by the external observers.

When special tires are needed to evacuate the wounded from battlefields and the government cannot provide them on time, the most efficient way to get the right tires to the right place will mobilize volunteers, whatever the method. The goal is to save lives; formalities come distant second, if at all. Adequately supplied public schools, houses of worship, recreational spaces, street lights, playgrounds, equitable urban infrastructures, university events, amateur sports, nature conservancy, support for refugees and veterans – many of these result in activities situated at the intersection of the three societal sectors (government, business, and civil society), sectors that are still being shaped and redefined almost thirty years after the collapse of the USSR in which all of these undertakings were provided (or forbidden) by the state. Informality allows civil society to transcend the sectors of society, providing the social guarantees neither of the formal three sectors is willing or able to deliver.

Apart from basic service delivery, how do civil society's informal activities shape Ukraine's democracy? More specifically, does informality, overall, have positive effects on

cultivating democratic institutions in Ukraine, building trust and social capital, and fostering citizen engagement in political life (de Tocqueville, 1945; Putnam 1993)? Or, on the contrary, do informal civic practices have the opposite effect on political engagement by encouraging citizens to focus on narrow and localized issues within familiar networks, thus effectively precluding them from meaningful political deliberation (Eliasoph 1996)?

The answers to these questions are complex and require further research; however, my study findings provide at least partial insights. Certain types of organizations and initiatives do indeed task themselves with promoting a sense of civic duty, public engagement, and patriotism through their activities. Some activists report building democratic institutions and *civicness* as being implicitly part of their core missions. Interviewees proposed:

R67: ...perhaps this would sound bold, but right now we are working on forming the kind of society that should be and that will be in the future. We are beginning, little by little, to pull people out, and people become interested, people begin entering the civic life of our town, people become interested in processes transpiring in this town, how this town works, what kinds of problems it has, how we can help the town, how we can improve our immediate surroundings. People begin associating and the very civil society is emerging, the one that everyone is talking much about but nobody knows where this society is and of what it consists.

R5: This is the main task for the volunteers. Not only to help, clothe, feed, cure. Certainly, this is also accomplished through volunteerism, but in order to have more volunteers, we need to develop this direction [of fostering patriotism] as well. This is a very long process and someone has to start it, and the sooner the better.

Furthermore, there is also evidence that, at least for some individuals, getting involved in informal, episodic activities of civil society signify the beginning of a more sustained, “thicker” civic engagement, within or outside of formal and institutionalized organizations. For several respondents of this study, participating in informal community projects had served as a way of getting more involved, to understand and acknowledge their role in creating publics, counterbalancing the invasive, as well as negligent, state. A respondent illustrated:

R52: Moreover, it is important to emphasize that the ecological issue is really a kind of an excuse essentially to gather people who care about the city where they live, care about Ukraine where they live, and to experience the very civil society.

At the same time, certain informal associational activity, especially carried out by the self-organized local community groups, tend to work in parallel with the government – intentionally circumventing the governmental institutions tasked with providing the very commodities delivered by these informal groups. This, ostensibly, exacerbates distrust and disengagement from political life. While attitudes towards the government and its formal institutions within those initiatives tend to be mutually distrusting, the informal groups often collaborate extensively with governmental institutions in those aspects of their projects that render them more effective. The villagers, for instance, take it upon themselves to expand their community pond, distrusting the government’s ability and will to do so timely and effectively; however, they need official permits to conduct a project that technically must be (and officially is) accomplished by the local government. A fair amount of social capital must exist between the activists and governmental officials, as well as reliable and mutually enforced informal institutions, in order for the project to be successful. Subsequently, there is collaboration, as well as contention, between community members and the village *holova* (mayor) on multiple levels, aimed at increasing the quality of intended outcomes. How it is accomplished and what rules have been bent are secondary to having a pond by which they can fish and recuperate after a hard week’s work.

While the informal activity can steer citizens away from participating with governmental institutions in formal ways, it opens doors for informal communication and cooperation. Going through formal means, the villagers could petition their local government to expand the pond; however, distrusting the efficacy of such approach, citizens go around the authorities in certain respects, and work directly with it (albeit informally) – in others. Through informal activity,

citizens find capacities and resources internally to solve social problems when formal institutions and processes fail to do so. It enhances economic conditions and provides space for asserting agency and exercising cooperation in general, as well as for building trust.

This brings up the topic of social capital. Informal activities based in personal relationships that are infused with particularized trust signal the prevalence of the bonding social capital (meaning trust and cooperation within groups) in the Ukraine's society. A heavy reliance on the bonding social capital presents certain challenges to the development of the bridging (relationships between groups) and linking capitals (cooperation with other sectors of society). While the Euromaidan revolution has demonstrated Ukrainian citizens' potential and capacity for creating and utilizing bridging and linking capitals, these dynamics were not sustained on the same levels after the revolution, when the preponderance of the bonding capital once again took hold. While the informal relationships between actors of different groups, as well as between representatives of different sectors, suggest bridging and linking is possible within common objectives that can transcend institutional and sectoral boundaries, these dynamics do not usually translate into bridging and linking in general. These developments do, however, suggest there is latent but significant potential for mobilization within informal networks in times of crisis.

Importantly, the role of informality in advancing democratic values and trust is dependent on the relative independence of these activities from external influences. As Edwards (2014) argued, "associational life [it was found] does contribute to democracy and state accountability, but not as much as was thought, and only when certain conditions are met"; these conditions include, among other things, a predominance of domestic funding to CSOs (p. 102). In contrast to formal CSOs that are often heavily reliant on foreign institutional funding, informal civil society groups are funded almost exclusively by domestic, and predominantly local, sources,

with their leaders taking pride in their independence from third-party agendas. Independence from external influences was described by many informal group leaders as an important strategy pivotal for building and sustaining public trust.

On the flip side of the coin, while informal activities can deliver services and even enhance democratic norms, such gains can be short-lived and unsustainable. The lack of institutionalization puts continuity and sustainability of informal initiatives at risk. Once certain projects are implemented and the outcomes are reached, groups tend to fall apart lacking long-term common goals and resources to continue the work. The institutionalization processes, however, are not always or necessarily good for civic engagement and democracy. In the United States, Skocpol (1999; 2003) argued the nonprofit sector became increasingly professionalized and corporatized, losing grassroots engagement by diverse and marginalized populations. In Estonia, Lagerspetz (2008) cautions, the overt professionalization largely dictated by the European Union mandates, detracts grassroots engagement from the country's CSOs, thus posing risks for the long-term development and sustainability of the sector. While replete with issues and challenges due to the lack of institutionalization, the informal associational activity may actually be offsetting the negative side-effects of externally-driven institution-building processes that are often associated with bureaucratization of the nonprofit sector which tends to detract citizens from authentic civic engagement. The informal side of Ukraine's civil society, on the other hand, provides a "space" for more familiar and relatable associational institutions.

In sum, while offering essential services which neither the governmental, business, nor even the formal civil society organizations are able or willing to tackle, informal civil society initiatives can also counterbalance the negative effects of formal sector's professionalization and the negative perceptions of formal CSOs prevalent in society. At the same time, informal

activities can lack strategy and sustainability, focusing on narrow issues rather than engaging in broader societal collaboration. Nevertheless, while levels of informality could be reduced over time (by building on informality's strengths while compensating for its inherent weaknesses), certain activities will and should remain informal and ephemeral in the long term for the sake of maintaining an authentic and vibrant ecosystem of civic engagement.

### **Conclusion**

This paper asked the following research question: What role does distrust of formal institutions play in Ukraine's civil society? Based on in-depth interviews with civil society actors from across Ukraine, the paper finds that, in addition to alienating society from the state and inhibiting engagement with formal CSOs, Ukrainian citizens' fundamental distrust of formal institutions plays a central and dual role in civil society's structures and motivations. While serving as a mechanism for creating alternative, informal institutions of civil society, institutional distrust also gives impetus for civic engagement. The state's perceived failure of delivering on basic guarantees prompts the creation of service-focused initiatives, while the state's abuse of power drives advocacy groups. The wide-spread wariness of formal CSOs further stimulates informal practices.

Informal civil society in Ukraine is an outcome-driven part of the sector, intent on getting things done, as effectively and efficiently as possible, in a highly volatile and resource-deficient environment. In the process of achieving its goals, a vision of building democratic institutions is present, but the efforts are still nascent and unsystematic. Additionally, informal civic practices can counteract the negative side-effects of the predominantly externally-driven institution building processes that tend to discourage citizens from authentic civic engagement, while providing a more familiar and relatable "space" for achieving common goals.

Despite its obvious drawbacks, informality in Ukraine's civil society is expressed as a space of relative *autonomy* from its external environment characterized by adverse legislative, political and economic conditions. Civil society actors, find ways to pursue their missions informally, instead of disengaging or facing the risks of cooptation and repression. While resisting and at times combating the incongruous formal institutions, activists and service providers also find ways to work in parallel with them, adapting, adjusting, compromising, all the while reducing transaction costs, and increasing independence and maneuverability. Informality provides greater choices in steering the desired change, instead of expecting it from the government or the formal CSOs.

For better or for worse, informal engagement is the method for the Ukrainian society for attaining and expanding their *civic agency*, defined by Fowler (2010) as “a predisposition toward, and a capability for, leading life together with others in a society and being concerned for the whole” (p. 150). It is an imperfect and perhaps transitional, yet practical way to navigate the external environment while co-creating civic identity that reflects the informal civil society actors' vision of civic engagement, which they are not always able to find in the formal domain. The definition of *civicness* thus encompasses cooperation with the state in its actions that are perceived as legitimate, while avoiding or pushing back on those actions that are perceived as outright illegitimate or undemocratic.

At the same time, there are tremendous limits to what informal voluntary action can do. The informal nature of Ukraine's civil society is full of challenges, not only in terms of the restricted room for long-term growth and sustainability, but also for the potential lack of consolidation of society. Informality also opens doors for corruption and malfeasant fiscal

practices, and, arguably, allows room for radical agendas to surface and thrive, especially in the context of war and illegal occupation of the country's territories.

That being said, “[in]formality is here to stay” (Morris & Polese 2014, p. 1), and some activities will and should remain unhindered by professionalization and external support. However, levels of society's reliance on informal practices should be reduced for civic initiatives to have a more sweeping impact and to be more sustainable in the future. Building trust is a long-term process, spanning far beyond regulatory change, beyond foundations' change logics, and beyond even the state-civil society relationship. It will take a concerted and strategic effort across all three sectors of society to eventually build the appropriate institutions that would foster public trust and cooperation, providing impetus for engaging more widespread civic participation in public processes and sustainable CSOs.

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