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# Synthesis Situational Assessment Report

Ukraine: South of Odesa, Kherson and  
Zakarpattia regions



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Front cover image: Girl running towards an old wooden windmill at the National Museum of Folk Architecture and Life of Ukraine, in Pyrohiv, Kiev, Ukraine © Pikoso.kz /Shutterstock 2015



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# Abbreviations

<b>ATO</b>	Anti-Terrorist Operation
<b>FGD</b>	Focus group discussion
<b>IDP</b>	Internally displaced person
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation

# Executive Summary

This synthesis report summarises the research findings of a situational analysis with conflict risk potential in three regions of Ukraine – **south of Odesa (part of which is also known as Bessarabia), Kherson and Zakarpattia** – which are considered vulnerable to geopolitical pressure and destabilisation. The report is based on **three case studies** that examine the internal dynamics in **seven hromadas**.<sup>1</sup> The analysis focuses on identifying opportunities to support community resilience to violence and strengthen stability and prospects for sustainable peace.

The common root causes of conflict stem from **underlying national-level processes** (geopolitical, political, economic and social). This report reviews them briefly to situate local dynamics in a wider context. Further analysis elaborates the **issues that drive tensions** at the regional and local level, such as:

- propaganda and ‘fake news’ that displace rational analysis and stir up discontent;
- divisive narratives that alienate minority groups and threaten cohesion;
- shadow economies and political corruption that institutionalise social cleavages and undermine the reform process;
- low local capacity for conflict management and resolution, which hinders timely and effective crisis response;
- a civil society that is too weak and fragmented to support stability and advocate for positive change;
- entrenched patriarchal gender norms that drive exclusion and insecurity; and
- international and domestic initiatives that are not conflict-sensitive.

Lastly, the report offers **recommendations** addressed primarily to local and international civil society actors, and the donor community. They offer a baseline for peacebuilding programming as part of a long-term strategy for building resilient, inclusive and peaceful societies. The recommendations fall into two categories:

## Short term

- Countering propaganda and ‘fake news’, and developing critical thinking
- Building crisis-management and conflict-resolution skills of local decision-makers
- Changing attitudes towards minorities and increasing their integration
- Improving conflict-sensitivity of external engagement

## Long term

- Peace and conflict education
- Long-term minority integration
- Transforming civil society into an agent for change
- Supporting the development and consolidation of local small- and medium-sized businesses
- Changing imbalanced power dynamics based on gender

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<sup>1</sup> *Hromada* is a Ukrainian term for a ‘territorial commune’. Although currently not formal administrative units, *hromadas* have certain self-governance responsibilities and are at the heart of decentralisation reform.



Tension between a supporter of national patriotic forces and a woman supporter of pro-Russian views.  
© Irina Parshina 2015

## 1. Introduction

Five years on after the conflict in the east and the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine continues to face a number of geopolitical and domestic challenges. Against this backdrop, concerns for Ukraine's integrity feature highly in the national discourse and are echoed by some international observers.

The purpose of this analysis is to investigate the situation in three locations in Ukraine – Kherson oblast, south of Odesa oblast and Zakarpattia oblast – by identifying and analysing internal political, social and economic processes, actors, and factors; by determining how they relate to each other to create and maintain conflict dynamics; by assessing risks for violent conflict; and by mapping out opportunities for strengthening resilience and peace at the grassroots level.

The regions were selected as they share common characteristics, including:

- proximity to international (de facto) borders and strong links with other state(s);
- geographical remoteness from Kyiv;
- high numbers of ethnic and religious minorities; and
- agricultural economy and long patriarchal traditions.

While these similarities allowed for methodological consistency and comparability of the data, the analysis showed that there are important differences that require more nuanced strategies and approaches in each context.

## 2. Methodology

In October and November 2018, a series of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out in seven *hromadas* in the three research regions.

The qualitative study draws on the views and experiences of 123 respondents, aged 25–60: 56 people (36 men and 20 women) were interviewed individually and 67 (42 women and 25 men) participated in FGDs. Respondents were sampled from a wide range of professional and social backgrounds, and included: local government officials; representatives of education, health and social services; businesspeople; journalists; law-enforcement officers; civic activists; and religious leaders. They identified with diverse (majority and minority) ethnic and religious groups present in the regions and represented different age categories. Given the sensitivity of the research topic and the pre-election political environment, all participants have been kept anonymous.

Based on a relational (referring to the social construction of masculinities and femininities) and intersectional (as systems of power shaped by other identities)<sup>2</sup> approach, the methodology included questions on gender dynamics to ensure gender was mainstreamed through research in each region. This allowed for the most prominent gender issues to be highlighted; these are briefly discussed in this paper and in more depth in the three separate case studies. However, a more focused methodology is required to uncover deep-rooted gendered drivers and effects and to find ways to help overcome a lack of interest in gender issues among local stakeholders (a fact brought to light during this project).

The study also included desk research and a review of literature, including media reports (including social media), documents of national and local authorities and statistical bodies, and interviews with local and international experts and representatives of international organisations.

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2 H. Myrntinen, N. Popovic and L. Khattab, 'Measuring gender' in peacebuilding: Evaluating peacebuilding efforts from a gender-relational perspective, London: International Alert, 2016, [https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Gender\\_MeasuringGenderPeacebuilding\\_EN\\_2016.pdf](https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Gender_MeasuringGenderPeacebuilding_EN_2016.pdf); S. Tielemans, Gender & conflict analysis toolkit for peacebuilders, London: Conciliation Resources, 2015, <https://www.c-r.org/downloads/CR%20Gender%20Toolkit%20WEB.pdf>



Kherson Catholic and Lutheran priests during a mournful service at the cemetery where German militants from the Second World War are buried. © Irina Parshina 2015

## 3. Context Analysis<sup>3</sup>

### 3.1 South of Odesa oblast<sup>4</sup>

Despite the warning of a potential “Bessarabian Spring”<sup>5</sup> a few years ago, the research findings suggest that, although discontent with the status quo is prevalent among communities, “those differences are not great enough to cause one side to act to alter the situation”. This can be described as a latent stage on the conflict curve.<sup>6</sup>

South of Odesa is the most ethnically diverse region in Ukraine, home to Bulgarian, Gagauz, Moldovan, Romanian, Albanian, Roma, Russian and Jewish minorities. No ethnic group forms a dominating majority or has a land border with patron states,<sup>7</sup> except for Moldovans. The lingua franca is Russian. While representatives of each of the minorities highlighted the importance of cultural and linguistic needs (more specifically in the context of the

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3 This is only a brief analysis. The three separate case study papers (one on each region) go into greater detail.

4 Research was conducted in the following *hromadas*: Bolhrad, Reni and Rozdolnoye.

5 M. Kosienkowski, The Republic of Budjak: Next in line?, *New Eastern Europe*, 2 January 2015, [http://neweasterneurope.eu/old\\_site/articles-and-commentary/1437-the-republic-of-budjak-next-in-line](http://neweasterneurope.eu/old_site/articles-and-commentary/1437-the-republic-of-budjak-next-in-line)

6 E. Brahm, Latent conflict stage, *Beyond Intractability*, September 2003, <https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/latent-conflict>. On the conflict curve, see *Curve of conflict*, United States Institute of Peace, <https://www.usip.org/public-education/students/curve-conflict>, accessed [January 2019].

7 T. de Waal, *Uncertain ground: Engaging with Europe's de facto states and breakaway territories*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/deWaal\\_UncertainGround\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/deWaal_UncertainGround_final.pdf)

controversial national language reform),<sup>8</sup> there is a strong sentiment of multiculturalism and cohesion rooted in shared historic experiences and cultural similarities (e.g. communal wine-drinking). The rate of interethnic marriage is high and, although each ethnicity tends to occupy a specific economic niche, livelihoods and resources are interdependent.

*“We still have such relations when a neighbour will plaster the wall for you for free, and then you will return the favour. Mutual help is the normal thing here – this is called ‘meji’ in the local language. Traditionally, when, for example, Albanians, Gagauz and Bulgarians built their houses, the whole village builds the house for each in turn. It brings people together.”*

Geographical remoteness from Kyiv, poor transport infrastructure and a lack of an effective communications strategy on national reforms has made locals wary of decentralisation. However, with improved communication policies from Kyiv and positive cases of communities’ amalgamation elsewhere in the region, attitudes have been steadily improving and reform is now taking root.

*“Over the past 3–4 years, I observe a change. It used to be just negative. [Now] residents themselves are set for a positive outcome.”*

Another illustration of the region’s distinctiveness from other parts of Ukraine is the negative attitude towards paramilitary organisations. These groups do not exist in the region in the form they do in other places, such as Kherson oblast. Part of the reason might be that the social capital of such groups – often associated with Ukrainian ultranationalism – may be lower in Russophone societies in the south of Odesa. Many respondents emphasised that “we would not accept them”. This is significant when assessing potential for violence in the region.

The positive factors above that stress social cohesion, reform progress and rejection of paramilitary groups do not eliminate security risks completely. Multiple systemic problems in Ukraine; continuous involvement of ethnic patron states (Bulgaria, Romania, as well as Turkey); the proximity of Transnistria and the Russian Federation’s regular military units<sup>9</sup> all need close monitoring. This should be backed by a long-term strategy for strengthening efficient and inclusive systems to help the region resist geopolitical pressures and commit to Ukraine’s nationbuilding project.

## 3.2 Kherson oblast<sup>10</sup>

Following the conflict and annexation of Crimea in 2014, people living in the south of Kherson oblast suddenly found themselves on a ‘new border’ that brought unfamiliar security risks, economic burdens, political uncertainties, and propaganda from many sides.

*“We are also a ‘border’ region, but all the attention is going to Donetsk and Luhansk [oblasts].”*

All this exacerbated the pre-existing problems of corruption, competition over resources, powerful criminal networks, and extreme social deprivation. It also created vicious new dynamics through uncontrolled paramilitary groups, a legacy of the conflict in the east, and migration (both in and out of the regions), including of Crimean Tatar internally displaced persons (IDPs). This has resulted in ethnic and religious tensions.

8 Ukrainian president signs controversial language bill into law, Radio Liberty, 26 September 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainian-poroshenko-signs-controversial-language-bill-into-law/28757195.html>

9 M. Ciobanu, The withdrawal of Russian troops from Transnistria: Second attempt, JAMnews, 22 June 2018, <https://jam-news.net/the-withdrawal-of-russian-troops-from-transnistria-attempt-two/>

10 Research was conducted in the following *hromadas*: Chaplynka, Genichesk, and Kalanchak.

This mix of old and new challenges sets the region apart from the other two and situates it higher on the conflict curve, at the *emergence stage*.<sup>11</sup> Frustrations are expressed openly and strongly. Violence is used routinely to settle disputes, such as over land or in interethnic relations.

The research showed that the main root causes lie in feudal land relationships, in which key economic resources and political processes are largely controlled by a few oligarchs empowered by weak state laws and institutions. The central authorities (apart from border guards and security services) pay little attention. Poor Soviet-era minority integration policies and current xenophobic attitudes have led to the exclusion and self-isolation of the region's Muslim communities (Crimean Tatars and Meskhetian Turks). Women from these communities find it most difficult to integrate, as many of them are confined to narrow family circles. Both local politicians and external actors (including Turkey and Russia) engage in and exploit 'identity politics'; for local politicians it offers a means of gaining electoral capital. Russia still has influence in the region (historically Kherson oblast was part of the Communist Red Belt<sup>12</sup> in Ukraine) – directly through targeted propaganda and indirectly through pressure on compromised local politicians.

The decentralisation reform process is faltering as directives from Kyiv are applied selectively, depending on the interests of the agrarian cartels. There is concern that, even when implemented, the process will end up reinforcing existing territories or spheres of influence, thus consolidating 'baron republics' – areas controlled by land and business monopolists.

Paramilitary groups formed of ex-Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) (now known as the Joint Forces Operation) veterans<sup>13</sup> and soldiers returning home from the Donbas are thriving. Reintegration programmes for former combatants are insufficient in depth and scope, while the market for their services of intimidation, racketeering, and violence is often the only way for battle-hardened frustrated 'professional veterans', who are overwhelmingly young and middle-aged men, to attain social status and livelihoods.<sup>14</sup> Police response to criminal activities committed by these groups is limited as 'defenders of the motherland' are held in high esteem locally, as well as due to corrupt relationships between the police and local elites. While these groups do not represent an independent political force or pursue a particular agenda, they could be quickly mobilised for mass disorder and violence.

The flip side of thwarted/unrealised masculinities is that in comparison to the other two regions, many women (not just Muslim) in the target *hromadas* in Kherson oblast appear to be deprived of the most basic opportunities, from travelling (even to the city of Kherson, not to mention further afield) to joining a gym. These things often require permission from male partners. While the scope of this analysis did not include a study of gender-based violence, there is evidence<sup>15</sup> suggesting domestic violence is common in the region.

11 L. Kriesberg, Conflict emergence stage, Beyond Intractability, September 2003, <https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/conflict-emergence>

12 D. Gorbach, After the ban: A short history of Ukraine's Communist Party, openDemocracy, 8 January 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/denys-gorbach/after-ban-short-history-of-ukraine-s-communist-party>

13 V. Zimmerman, What does Ukraine's new military approach toward the Donbas mean?, Atlantic Council, 15 May 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/what-does-ukraine-s-new-military-approach-toward-the-donbas-mean>

14 For more on gendered reintegration experiences in Ukraine, see Alert's forthcoming policy brief, developed as part of the 'Peace Research Partnership' project.

15 Ukrainian Centre for Social Reforms, Gender-based violence in the conflict-affected regions of Ukraine, Kyiv: United Nations Population Fund, 2016, [https://ukraine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/gbv%20in%20the%20conflict-affected%20regions%20of%20ukraine\\_eng.pdf](https://ukraine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/gbv%20in%20the%20conflict-affected%20regions%20of%20ukraine_eng.pdf)

### 3.3 Zakarpattia oblast<sup>16</sup>

Berehove, the administrative centre of Berehiv *rayon*, is considered the cultural centre of the Hungarian ethnicity living in Ukraine. Hungarians form the majority of the city's population – at least 48%<sup>17</sup> – and it is the closest large city near the border with Hungary (8–10 kilometres). Local identity and the established way of life (i.e. the status quo) are the most guarded values. A mountainous, isolating geography, frequently shifting borders over the past 100 years,<sup>18</sup> and mostly authoritarian forms of government have resulted in locals developing a high degree of self-reliance and strengthening social institutions outside the state for economic survival and community security.

*“People basically prefer not to go to the authorities with their problems. They go to their acquaintances in order to ‘fix’ things. The average Zakarpattian will always try to solve their problems through friends and contacts and will not simply rely on the state authorities to fulfil their functions.”*

The extended family is the cornerstone of local identity. This is where rules are set and roles distributed, which is why any interference from the outside world is viewed with suspicion and perceived as a threat.

In the economic sphere, which is largely defined by the proximity of the international border with Hungary, family networks and contacts are at the core of illegal and semi-legal business. The rule of law is seen as weak, therefore, institutionalised criminal groups oversee business flows and control trade, which is often illicit.

Local politics are defined by informal community leaders, influential figures from all walks of life, and elected politicians. All these actors aim to preserve the status quo and maintain the unique web of informal relationships that holds the community together. They have been known to exploit interstate tensions between Ukraine and Hungary (for example, the recent passport scandal)<sup>19</sup> for their own ends.

Relationships between Kyiv and the region are beset by misperceptions and manipulation of reality on both sides. ‘Separatism’ is a charged term resented by local people, who see themselves portrayed as troublemakers in need of pacification by the security services.

*“For three years in a row, anti-Hungarian publications come out every day. All kinds of journalists, television programmes [say] that Hungarians do not speak the state language, Hungarians are separatists, only negative information is given to Ukrainians ... How can this be allowed – to say so, to insult Zakarpattia? The communication needs to be changed.”*

Geopolitical tensions between Ukraine and Hungary catalyse longstanding grievances. As they are coming to the surface and being reshaped by new expectations (such as stronger integration within Ukraine) and perceived threats to cultural identity and traditional ways of life, the dynamics are rapidly moving to the *emergence* stage on the conflict curve.<sup>20</sup>

The opaque social fabric and specific forms of civic self-organisation (on top of Ukraine's national-level problems) might make peacebuilding interventions less straightforward. However, considering the continued geopolitical rivalries in the region and the potential for a small local issue to flare up and trigger larger-scale conflict, it is imperative to engage with the context in a sensitive and inclusive manner.

16 Research was conducted in the following *hromada*: Berehiv *rayon*.

17 See the individual case study on Zakarpattia.

18 I. Tharoor and G. Thorp, Maps: How Ukraine became Ukraine, The Washington Post, 9 March 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/09/maps-how-ukraine-became-ukraine/?utm\\_term=.9b27ea7770bb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/09/maps-how-ukraine-became-ukraine/?utm_term=.9b27ea7770bb)

19 A. Arunyan, How Hungary and Ukraine fell out over a passport scandal, openDemocracy, 11 October 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/aleksei-arunyan/how-kyiv-and-budapest-fell-out-over-zakarpattya>

20 L. Kriesberg, 2003, Op. cit.

## 4. General Findings

### 4.1 Common root causes of conflict

The seven *hromadas* represent three different regions of Ukraine, with different histories, social institutions, and traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms. They have diverse ethnic and religious composition, sets of actors, and internal and external processes that contribute to both resilience and vulnerability to larger-scale conflict. Nevertheless, a cross-regional outlook shows a number of common root causes that hinder positive development and fuel conflict dynamics.

Stability requires a functional nation state that can ensure security, justice, the rule of law and sound economic management. Although the purpose of this analysis does not encompass a study of the national-level factors in Ukraine, it is important to describe those factors that facilitate a conflict-enabling environment and affect local processes:

**Geopolitical:** Ongoing conflict with Russia and constant risk of escalation, particularly for the 'new frontline' communities, such as Kherson oblast; tensions with Hungary and its policies that do not sit well with Ukraine's recent experiences of losing control over its territories; high levels of influence of other patron states (Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Turkey) towards kin ethnic minorities in Ukraine.

**Political:** Internal struggles between elites for power, weak state institutions, a lack of strategic vision for the regions, a lack of inclusive policy-making and meaningful representation, and a lack of effective communication strategies from the centre all undermine the legitimacy of the central authorities in the regions and regions' commitment to the national agenda.

**Economic:** Unfair and poorly regulated resource distribution, particularly of land and other natural resources (timber, coastal water resources), mean that powerful groups and individuals – bolstered by political connections – maintain informal institutions that protect their vested economic interests and resist change.

**Social:** Exclusionary practices towards entire groups based on their gender, ethnic or religious background, particularly Roma and Muslim communities, leads to major imbalances in power, inequality of access to services, and a lack of opportunities. Mass pendulum (short-term migration or long-distance commuting), seasonal, and permanent migration for labour or education, particularly among young people, shifts demographic and gender dynamics, which is perceived negatively and as a rupture of social cohesion.

### 4.2 Key conflict drivers and issues

The big-picture factors described above inevitably affect the potential for violence locally, depending on the context and actors. We found similar conflict drivers in all three regions:

#### **Propaganda and 'fake news' displace rational analysis and stir up discontent**

The vast majority of respondents in all research areas indicated that rumours were the main source of information. They often replace news and analysis in the local media, which in general lacks pluralist (and non-oligarch-linked) financial resources to ensure independence and professional ethical standards. The elderly (those over 60

nostalgic for Soviet times) and the young generation (teenagers and those in their early 20s) are most susceptible to information manipulation, including through social media and sub-cultures.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, respondents cited “external interference” as a conflict trigger in each area, referring particularly to pitting rival groups against each other along ethnic, religious and social identity lines.

### **Divisive narratives alienate minority groups and threaten social cohesion**

Far-right discourse<sup>22</sup> and the post-war rise of nationalist populism excludes minorities, especially religious and ethnic ones, from social and political processes, and subjects them to varying degrees of structural violence. Muslim minorities often isolate themselves from the majority population with whom they sometimes have tense relations. Women from conservative Muslim communities are doubly excluded and are most vulnerable to xenophobic and misogynistic attitudes. Divisive narratives about minority groups and hostile images and perceptions of ‘separatism’ are perpetuated by regional and national media; these only alienate these communities further. Identity conflict remains a resource for external manipulation in Ukraine’s conservative rural areas, and is exploited for the geopolitical and domestic interests of neighbouring countries.

### **Shadow economies and political corruption institutionalise social cleavages and undermine reform**

Competition between oligarchic, informal, and often criminal economic interests can create political and social divisions. These interests use tactics such as political manipulation and sponsoring of divisive politics to ensure their survival and monopoly over economic assets, natural resources or markets. According to respondents, any encroachment on their individual interests, such as land reform or potential new investors, will almost certainly provoke conflict. Paramilitary and criminal groups (sometimes formed on an ethnic basis, such as Chechens and Azeris in Kherson oblast, which further complicates the dynamics) are often on the payroll of big businesses and present a formidable outfit capable of orchestrating large-scale violence to order.

The only exception suggested was less profitable sectors, such as the nascent tourism industry and small-scale trade, which are more transparent and law-abiding (e.g. tax-paying, seeking legal remedies through courts). Driven by common interest in facing down ‘big’ competition, they have begun to form trade associations. There have even been cases when they have been successful in suing bigger business groups.

### **Low local capacity for conflict management and resolution hinders timely and effective crisis response**

The deeper one goes into the provinces of Ukraine, the less power and trust there is in Kyiv-based politicians at the local level. In all three regions, local leaders (including in elected positions) are seen as having the most authority and responsibility to resolve conflicts. In practice, however, they lack the capacity and skills to do so effectively and in a timely manner. Indeed, the habit of letting problems fester was found to be widespread and is viewed as irritating by respondents.

Local leaders said that they often find themselves in difficult situations and lack support from the police and regional authorities, who prefer to stay in the background and let the situation play itself out. This is particularly worrying for the three regions, where local disagreements have the potential to rapidly spiral out of control and be exploited by external actors.

21 See, for example, A. Kolesnikov, Rapping for the Kremlin: The regime hijacks a youth subculture, Carnegie Moscow Centre, 14 January 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78115>.

22 V. Likhachev, Far-right extremism as a threat to Ukrainian democracy, Nations in Transit brief, Washington DC: Freedom House, May 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/far-right-extremism-threat-ukrainian-democracy>

## Civil society is too weak and fragmented to support stability and promote inclusion

The protest movement in Ukraine spawned civil society bodies of various types. Five years on, there is a plethora of these bodies, both positive and negative. They range from genuine grassroots activists and volunteer groups, to government-organised non-governmental organisations (NGOs), pocket NGOs (serving the interests of particular elite groups), 'professional veterans' (often in the form of paramilitary units and private militias), and "conservative civil society",<sup>23</sup> which propagates extreme religious values and far-right nationalism. By and large, these groups replicate the nationwide picture not only in form but in content, focusing on ad hoc spontaneous protests, street mobilisation, picketing, and other types of disruption.

There is also an issue of trust and legitimacy between NGOs and their constituencies. Some NGOs are believed to serve as mere intermediaries between donors and the government. They are seen as reliant on grants to organise training and roundtables perceived to be pointless by many respondents. Some NGOs were established by individuals in government or businesses to serve the interests of particular elite groups or to siphon off state funds allocated for non-profit organisations. In other instances, NGOs are thought to be pushing a political agenda, as for example, Hungary-funded NGOs in Zakarpattia being accused of "sowing separatism".

## Entrenched patriarchal gender norms drive exclusion and insecurity

The extremely patriarchal social order in the research areas means that roles and expectations are predefined and attributed to men, women, girls and boys on the basis of their sex, age and ethnic origin. Years of instability and conflict have entrenched more rigid gender stereotypes that men and women are expected to fulfil: these are narrow, uncompromising and violent identities as attributes of masculinity, and a subordinate and reproductive function for women.

The phenomenon of ATO veterans' involvement in paramilitary groups is clear evidence of men frustrated by life after war. Economic hardship and a lack of jobs have forced women to take on a broader range of economic and societal roles.<sup>24</sup> In the post-Maidan wake, women have also been the main driving force of the grassroots volunteer movement. Despite fulfilling these new roles, women remain marginalised in the political sphere. For example, as a result of decentralisation in some *hromadas*, women leaders have been pushed out by male leaders of newly amalgamated communities that now enjoy more resources and subsidies from the centre. Those few women who are in politics might be keen to take a more radical nationalist stand and promote conflict in an attempt to reach the levels of power and influence that men enjoy.

Gender minorities are kept on the margins of society and prevented from having an independent voice, which makes it particularly challenging for them to initiate or lead conversations on conflict and inclusion. These distortions in the social fabric create more division and undermine community cohesion and resilience to conflict.

## International and domestic initiatives lack conflict-sensitivity and/or relevance

For reasons similar to those that initiated this research, these three areas are receiving a lot of international attention and, therefore, aid. It was beyond the scope of this study to access and analyse impact evaluations of aid projects, however, respondents in the three regions criticised external interventions in their communities as being conflict-insensitive. They complained that these initiatives privileged the interests and grievances of one group over

23 R. Youngs (ed.), *The mobilization of conservative civil society*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/10/04/two-faces-of-conservative-civil-society-in-ukraine-pub-77374>

24 For example, respondents reported an increase in female labour migrants from Odesa region to Turkey and from Zakarpattia to Eastern Europe.

another, carried out research that highlighted problems without offering solutions, or presented biased or muddled analyses. While perceptions of unfairness in aid distribution are common in any crisis, the lack of local consultation and accompanying outreach can exacerbate tensions among communities in competition with each other.

Similarly, the lack of clear communication and feedback mechanisms in implementing national reforms, such as decentralisation and the law on language education, create anxiety among people weary of instability. There is, therefore, fertile ground for disinformation, manipulation and the politicisation of certain issues.

Moreover, some international initiatives appear to locals as being irrelevant and/or impractical, being based more on the provider's interest/capacity than local needs (for example, a big project on tourism development in a *hromada* that is practically inaccessible to potential tourists). While not a conflict driver in itself, such approaches undermine trust in international assistance and develop fatigue among key constituencies, making them reluctant to participate in other programmes and thus harder to reach or engage.



March to support family values with representatives from the Muslim community in Kherson.  
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## 5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn from the analysis of existing strengths and opportunities; these should be built upon to reduce instability and promote lasting peace. They offer a baseline for peacebuilding programming choices, priorities, and methodologies that can help to address issues at the local and oblast level. They require action from various actors, demand different levels of resources and time frames, and vary in urgency. While they all aim to deal with cross-cutting issues in the three regions, this does not necessarily mean applying a 'one-size-fits-all' approach everywhere.

The recommendations are divided into short-term coping mechanisms and mitigation, and long-term strategies for building sustainable peace at the grassroots level. The division by no means implies a chronological order or a step-by-step approach. Quite the opposite – concerted efforts on multiple levels and holistic methodologies would have a stronger impact and a greater chance of resulting in attitudinal, behavioural, and structural transformations.

## 5.1 Impact mitigation and increasing resilience to violent conflict – short-term priorities

### Countering propaganda and ‘fake news’, and developing critical thinking

While “hybrid warfare”<sup>25</sup> is the talk of the day, practical action is still lacking. A challenge of such magnitude is difficult to tackle, however, it is imperative that people learn to think critically, recognise ‘fake news’ and use information responsibly, particularly those in high-security areas, in decision-making positions (local authorities and law enforcement), and in civil society<sup>26</sup> (media watchdog groups). This can be done by developing critical thinking modules as part of educational and professional development programmes.

Civil society groups dealing with conflict issues should – where possible and taking into account personal security risks – broaden their public profile and use (social) media more effectively to inform their communities about the issues and initiatives that affect them, and seek more public engagement in facilitated debate over disagreements.

The lack of reliable well-balanced analysis in the propagandistic media environment means that uncorroborated information can trigger disproportionate or misplaced responses from local, national and international actors. Building local expertise among civil society actors and journalists in conflict analysis can help to create an informal early warning system. This is vital in these highly volatile regions characterised by unpredictable geopolitical dynamics.

### Building crisis-management and conflict-resolution skills of local decision-makers

Local authorities and community leaders are often faced with crises but miss opportunities to intervene constructively at the crucial early stage. There have been a few training initiatives aimed at developing dialogue skills and practices in communities. These are useful in the long term, however, our research highlighted the need for training in crisis response and conflict resolution for these stakeholders to give them the tools, skills and confidence to deal with such situations authoritatively and in a conflict-sensitive manner.

Training, including all capacity-building programmes, should be in line with the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and seek to engage women in their less formal leadership roles; these roles might exclude them from the constituency but present an overlooked resource for conflict prevention and de-escalation. This, in turn, will contribute to increasing the role of women in communities as figures of authority.

### Changing attitudes towards minorities and increasing their integration

A long-term approach is required for minority integration, however, immediate de-escalation and conflict management can be achieved by changing people’s attitudes towards ethnic and religious minorities. This can be done through open dialogue projects between diverse communities (for example, respondents in Berehove mentioned that even participating in our ethnically mixed FGDs was their first opportunity to talk about common issues and perceptions of each other), and celebration of shared positive historic experiences and cultural

25 L. Todd Wood, Russian hybrid warfare in Ukraine, The Washington Times, 19 November 2018, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/nov/19/russian-hybrid-warfare-ukraine/>

26 Y. Golovchenko, M. Hartmann and R. Adler-Nissen, State, media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine: Citizen curators of digital disinformation, *International Affairs*, 94(5), 2018, pp.975–994, <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/94/5/975/5092080>

similarities such as wine-making and communal drinking traditions in the south of Odesa. Learning from other contexts of minority integration and sharing successful local case studies can be an effective tool for changing people's perceptions of 'threats' to their identity.

### Improving conflict-sensitivity of external engagement

While a wholesale programme on 'do no harm' and conflict-sensitivity for all external interventions might not be possible, local communities must be supported in developing their own conflict-sensitivity guidelines for international donor and aid organisations and governmental authorities in charge of reform (decentralisation in particular). Developing such a system will also increase local ownership of internationally sponsored initiatives and contribute to their relevance and sustainability.

## 5.2 Building sustainable peace at the grassroots level – long-term strategies

### Peace and conflict education

The understanding of peace and conflict is very specific, and defined by people's experience of war (including the Second World War). The main recent benchmark for conflict is the Donbas. For example, many respondents denied the existence of any conflict in their communities (*"We don't have conflict, look at Donbas – this is where conflict is"*), however, they simultaneously and openly reported acts of violence, such as car-burning, intimidation, or fights, as an accepted and "efficient" way of settling local disputes. Thus, peace is understood in negative terms, simply meaning the absence of war. Paradoxically, respondents declare that the values of compromise, flexibility, and balancing of interests are part of their identity, which contradicts reality.

Peace education programmes can build on these notions of compromise and flexibility to stimulate conversations on different forms of conflict and violence, and unpack abstract notions of positive peace<sup>27</sup> as the ultimate goal in any prosperous society. These programmes are different, for example, from civic education, as they encourage critical analysis and understanding of the structural factors that underpin conflict and injustice, and the consequences of violent conflict. They also instil the skills necessary to manage disagreements without recourse to violence, as well as values of tolerance, moderation and respect for opposing views. Tailor-made modules targeting specific areas and age groups (particularly young people) can be incorporated into formal and non-formal education curricula, and be a powerful preventative tool.

### Long-term minority integration

Since key conflict dynamics in the three regions revolve around identity and minority issues, they require a specific focus in long-term peacebuilding strategies. The most natural integration of ethnic and religious minorities and IDPs is through economic activities (for example, in small business) and interethnic grassroots activism. These forms of organic integration need to be studied, encouraged and, where possible, applied. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring that women from the most excluded minority communities (such as conservative Muslims and Roma) are not locked out of these integration efforts, as they are less likely to own a business or be independent activists.

27 For more on positive peace, see Programming Framework, London: International Alert, August 2017, [https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Organisation\\_ProgrammingFramework\\_EN\\_2017.pdf](https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Organisation_ProgrammingFramework_EN_2017.pdf)

Local minority policy development should be done in an open and inclusive manner with the participation of all ethnic and religious representatives. This should ensure that any structural change is accompanied by a change in attitudes and behaviour, and that the resulting policies will be genuinely implemented.

However, extra care should be given to conflict-sensitivity as some divisions are less obvious and carry the risk of exacerbating another conflict (for example between Muslims in Kherson oblast – Crimean Tatars versus Meskhetian Turks). Indeed, it must be envisaged what the conflict-sensitive integration of minorities would look like in areas where they constitute the majority population, such as the Hungarian majority in Berehove (Zakarpattia) or the Bulgarian majority in Bolhrad (Odesa region).

### **Transforming civil society into an agent for change**

Despite numerous difficulties and controversies, Ukraine's civil society is rich, vibrant, and dynamic, however, it needs support in becoming more 'civil' and more of a 'society'. This would firstly require some reflection within civil society on its values and mission in Ukraine, as, in a democracy, civil society strives to accommodate pluralism, diversity, and respect for other groups' interests and opinions.

While establishing working relations with political figures and parties, civil society groups must retain their independence. Building more equal partner relationships with the authorities can be achieved through diverting the energy currently focused on ad hoc activism and 'street power' (protest and disruption) to more strategic engagement with local, regional and national politics through advocacy and dialogue with governmental power structures.

Regional and local fragmentation can be overcome by growing and strengthening networks of like-minded groups for joint activities, large-scale campaigns, cross-learning, and peer support. This is vital for de-isolating closed communities.

Studying local forms of civic self-organisation, beyond NGOs, and nurturing interethnic activism in different spheres and shapes, should be a priority for international donor support to civil society development programmes.

### **Supporting the development and consolidation of local small- and medium-sized businesses**

While land reform in Ukraine is long overdue (it was postponed again at the end of 2018), it is also one of the most powerful triggers of conflict. Any attempts to reform land-centric communities must be carried out in a highly conflict-sensitive way and in conjunction with other reforms.

As nationwide regulation of resource distribution remains inefficient, economic causes of local disagreements and potential triggers for larger conflicts can be partially tackled by supporting small- and medium-sized businesses. In the three regions, nascent self-organised trade associations in sectors such as tourism represent a growing political force that balances out oligarchic interests.

Diversity of economic opportunities is important not only for encouraging healthy competition, but also for ensuring sufficient interdependence, both within and between different *hromadas*. Common business interests and activities have also been reported by research respondents as fast-track entry points for the integration of ethnic and religious minorities.

## Changing imbalanced power dynamics based on gender

Coming from the understanding of gender as power relations, deep-rooted cultural, social and political changes will not take place unless this essential part of human interaction is transformed. Long-term initiatives on understanding the role of gender relations in conflict dynamics and building inclusive (more peaceful) societies have to be developed in collaboration with local communities. Learning from past mistakes when designing effective approaches is of utmost importance, as many respondents singled out “gender training” [sic] as the least relevant format of international programmes, which is partly explained by the overall suspicion around the concept of gender itself.

Psycho-social<sup>28</sup> and economic reintegration<sup>29</sup> of former ATO combatants, including men and women of different ages and ethnicities, can be an entry point for a more open discussion of gender issues and taboo topics,<sup>30</sup> and for challenging ‘traditional’ notions of masculinity and femininity.

Participatory gender-focused conflict analysis processes are another way of empowering women and marginalised groups to gain confidence in speaking about conflict issues in public settings, obtaining local buy-in, and building understanding of the interplay between gender and conflict.

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28 Some aspects of mental health issues and access to services among IDPs in Ukraine can be relevant for ex-combatants’ psycho-social rehabilitation. See B. Roberts, N. Makhshvili, J. Javakhishvili and Hidden burdens of conflict: Issues of mental health and access to services among internally displaced persons in Ukraine, London: International Alert, Global Initiative on Psychiatry and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2017 <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/hidden-burdens-of-conflict-en>

29 For more specific recommendations on gendered reintegration in Ukraine, see Alert’s forthcoming policy brief, developed as part of the ‘Peace Research Partnership’ project.

30 Z. Bezpiatchuk, Former volunteer Ukrainian soldier challenges LGBT taboos, BBC News, 17 January 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-46897341/former-volunteer-ukrainian-soldier-challenges-lgbt-taboos>

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