

## The Role of Civil Society in Recovery and EU Integration of Ukraine

On 2 June 2026, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), in cooperation with the Ukrainian National Platform, the Stefan Batory Foundation and the European Endowment for Democracy, organised the event *"The Role of Civil Society in Recovery and EU Integration of Ukraine."* The event was hosted by the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the European Union (EU), and with the support of the Mission of Ukraine to the European Union.

Bringing together over 80 participants from civil society organisations, EU institutions, Member State representations, media and other stakeholders, the event served as a platform for dialogue ahead of the Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC) in Gdańsk, Poland. Two thematic panels focused on preserving and restoring human capital and advancing EU integration.

The speakers included:

- **Mr Arkadiusz Plucinski**, Deputy Head of the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the European Union, Minister-Counsellor
- **Ms Oksana Diukun**, Deputy Head of the Mission of Ukraine to the European Union
- **Ms Marta Wytrykowska**, Deputy Head of Division for Ukraine, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Secretariat-General, European External Action Service
- **Ms Iryna Kuropas**, Project Manager, Local Economic Development Agency of the Yavoriv District, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
- **Ms Anna Fedas**, International Cooperation Program Coordinator, Stefan Batory Foundation
- **Mr Wolfgang Nozar**, Head of Unit for Governance, Rule of Law, Financial Assistance, ENEST.D.3, Ukraine Service, Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, European Commission
- **Ms Ingrid Kressel**, Director of the Development Cooperation Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Estonia
- **Ms Zoryana Makarukha**, Counsellor, Mission of Ukraine to the European Union
- **Ms Nataliya Andrusevych**, Head of the Board, Resource and Analysis Center "Society and Environment", Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
- **Ms Liubov Akulenko**, Executive Director, Ukrainian Centre for European Policy
- **Mr Andrea Raimondi**, Director, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Secretariat

The sessions were moderated by **Dr Marcin Walecki**, Oxford University and European Endowment for Democracy Consultant and **Mr Hennadiy Maksak**, Executive Director, Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”.

A common message throughout the discussions was that civil society is a key actor in shaping and helping to implement different policies, monitoring reforms, promoting transparency and accountability and ensuring that recovery remains citizen-centred and responsive to local needs.

## Preserving and Restoring Human Capital

**Human capital remains one of Ukraine's most valuable assets and a cornerstone of its resilience, recovery and integration into the European Union.** In this context, it was emphasised that Ukraine's reconstruction must go beyond rebuilding physical infrastructure and should place people at the centre. Sustainable recovery will require, among others, investment in education, jobs and skills development, as well as mental health, social cohesion and community resilience. Creating conditions that encourage the return of displaced Ukrainians from abroad and supporting the internally displaced persons, were identified as critical priorities. At the same time, these topics should be handled with sensitivity, as they are too often used by Russia in its disinformation campaigns.

**Veterans were also mentioned as an important asset.** With more than 1.8 million veterans, their reintegration is a prerequisite for social cohesion, economic recovery and democratic resilience. It was also highlighted that civil society organisations have developed substantial expertise through years of direct work with veterans and their families, particularly in the areas of rehabilitation, psychological support, employment and community reintegration. A representative of an EU institution emphasised the importance of leveraging this experience to inform relevant future policies.

The [paper of the Ukrainian National Platform of EaP CSF](#), network of more than 150 non-governments organisations, on preserving and restoring human capital was also cited during the discussion.

**Furthermore, it was underlined that recovery must be rooted in the realities of local communities, where both challenges and solutions are most visible in practice.** Local communities should not be seen only as implementers of national policies. They are active actors in shaping conditions for people to stay, return, and invest in their future in Ukraine. They know their strengths, understand local labour market needs and are often best placed to design practical solutions.

Today, municipalities are placing greater efforts into economic development and investment attraction, by supporting entrepreneurship, improving investment readiness, developing industrial sites and strengthening cooperation with the private sector to create opportunities that help retain and attract people. **It was also highlighted that local authorities across Ukraine are increasingly adopting participatory approaches involving residents, businesses, civil society organisations to shape local development strategies and strengthen trust in local institutions.**

**The discussion also underscored the crucial role of international partners in Ukraine's recovery and that platforms such as the Ukraine Recovery Conference are very important.** However, it is equally important that discussions on reconstruction are not left solely to politicians and government officials. The Civil Society Forum, which will be held the day before the official part of the URC, is being organised by a network of international civil society partners. It will provide a platform for civil society organisations from Ukraine and the EU to present recommendations developed ahead of the URC and bring these perspectives into the broader policy debate in the URC.<sup>1</sup>

## Recommendations

- Place people at the centre of recovery and reconstruction policies, including by prioritising investment in education, skills development, mental health, social cohesion and community resilience.
- Develop comprehensive demographic and labour market policies and programmes that support the return of displaced Ukrainians, while addressing workforce shortages, skills mismatches and the long-term impacts of emigration and brain drain.
- Strengthen the capacity of municipal authorities to lead recovery at the local level through smart planning, economic diversification, workforce development and the implementation of just transition strategies, while improving access to EU funding and international recovery instruments.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Civil Society Forum is jointly organised by the European Endowment for Democracy, the International Renaissance Foundation, and the Stefan Batory Foundation, in partnership with a broad coalition of Ukrainian and international organisations supporting Ukraine's recovery, democratic resilience and civil society development, including the Build Ukraine Back Better Platform, Chatham House, the Foundations for Ukraine Network, the Open Society Foundations, the RISE Ukraine Coalition and the Robert Bosch Foundation. The Gdańsk Common Message is based on recommendations submitted by more than 500 representatives of civil society and will be officially published on 24 June 2026.*

- Provide predictable, long-term financial and technical assistance to local authorities and civil society organisations to support institutional capacity, service delivery and community-led recovery, while fostering partnerships and knowledge exchange between Ukrainian and EU actors.
- Ensure that recovery and reconstruction related policies are developed through meaningful participation of war-affected groups, including veterans and their families, persons with disabilities, internally displaced persons, residents of frontline communities and people from temporarily occupied territories, so that recovery measures reflect their needs and priorities.

## Advancing Ukraine's EU Integration

**The speakers stressed that recovery, reconstruction and EU accession are mutually reinforcing processes that should be pursued in parallel.** While reforms undertaken in the context of accession strengthen Ukraine's resilience, governance capacity, and institutional effectiveness, the accession process itself provides a strategic framework for guiding recovery and reconstruction in line with EU standards and values.

**A central theme of the discussion was the importance of maintaining momentum in the accession process.** Speakers highlighted progress in preparing for the opening of Cluster 1, including the development of reform roadmaps and benchmarks. While substantial progress has been achieved, much work remains. Speakers stressed the need for a continued focus by both the Government of Ukraine and the Verkhovna Rada on delivering these reforms and meeting accession requirements.

**Civil society was repeatedly highlighted as a critical stakeholder in the accession process.** Beyond monitoring reforms and holding institutions accountable, civil society organisations provide expertise, facilitate dialogue between citizens and decision-makers, and help sustain reform momentum under challenging wartime conditions.

**Speakers emphasised that meaningful civil society participation should remain an integral component of both accession-related policymaking and recovery governance.** At the same time, it was noted that for civil society to effectively fulfil this role, the enlargement process must remain credible and deliver tangible progress. In this regard, sustained political commitment from the EU and its Member States was considered paramount for maintaining confidence in the accession process and supporting continued reform efforts.

**Strategic communication emerged as another important area in which civil society can make a substantial contribution.** Speakers highlighted the need to communicate more effectively the benefits of EU integration to citizens in both Ukraine and EU Member States. Strengthening public understanding of how reforms improve governance, expand economic opportunities, enhance environmental standards and improve quality of life was considered essential for sustaining support for enlargement. Experiences from previous enlargement rounds demonstrated the value of peer-to-peer exchanges, institutional partnerships, and knowledge-sharing between current Member States and candidate countries.

**The discussion further explored the link between EU accession and green reconstruction.** It was highlighted that environmental and climate-related reforms are increasingly driven by accession requirements and supported through instruments such as the Ukraine Facility. While notable legislative progress has been achieved, challenges remain, including the high costs of implementation, evolving EU environmental legislation, limited administrative capacity and long implementation timelines. Therefore, there is a need for a coherent strategic framework for green reconstruction and stronger institutional capacity to ensure effective alignment with the EU environmental acquis.

Finally, one speaker stressed the **importance of honest communication from EU Member States regarding Ukraine's accession prospects.** While acknowledging continued support for Ukraine's EU integration, the speaker raised questions about some of the Member States' readiness for further enlargement and emphasised the need for clear political signals demonstrating a sustained commitment to Ukraine's membership perspective, including through progress in opening negotiation clusters. The speaker also noted that Russia's ongoing war continues to strain Ukraine's public institutions, reducing administrative capacity and creating staffing shortages in key sectors. Given these challenges and the complexity of accession-related reforms, clear political support from all EU Member States is essential for sustaining reform momentum and reinforcing the credibility of Ukraine's European perspective.

## Recommendations

- Promote a shared understanding of Ukraine's recovery and EU integration as mutually reinforcing components of a single strategic transformation process.

- Ensure meaningful and structured participation of civil society in accession-related policymaking, monitoring, implementation and strategic communication efforts.
- Support Ukraine's gradual integration into selected EU policies, programmes, and areas of the Single Market while accelerating alignment with the EU acquis and preparing for full membership.
- Strengthen administrative and institutional capacities required for accession, including in the areas of rule of law, public administration reform, environmental governance and implementation of the green transition.
- Strengthen communication and outreach to the public in Member States on the strategic importance of Ukraine's enlargement, highlighting its benefits for European stability, security and long-term prosperity.

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