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Press release

Ukraine Crisis: Europe Needs More Active Citizenship

A study by the Allianz Foundation shows that NGOs and social movements are providing important crisis aid, but they are also coming under increasing pressure themselves

Civil society in Europe is more and more often stepping in when governments fall short. This is illustrated by the war in Ukraine, for example in the case of refugee women that are exposed to sexual violence. Civil society organizations are working tirelessly to help these women and others – quickly and without red tape. But their work comes with risks. Abuse on social media, lawsuits and personal attacks are not uncommon. That is one of the findings of the Allianz Foundation Risktaker Pulse survey that was conducted in five European countries.

“The aim of our research was to learn more about the influence and needs of civil society risktakers, that is people and organizations that actively fight for a social justice and a livable planet. Their work in and for Ukraine highlights how much the impact of their networks and nimble structures has been underestimated up until now,” says Dr. Simon Morris-Lange, Head of Research at the Allianz Foundation.

The study, carried out on behalf of the Allianz Foundation, is based on in-depth interviews with 59 civil society organizations in Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom. They were conducted in a period that was marked by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which currently dictates the focus of their work: Funding, organizational know-how and target group-specific expertise were activated and delivered at short notice to war zones and to help those fleeing their home countries. It is especially when government actions fall short that civil society can step in and help. To support women that have fallen victim to sexual violence, for instance, or to help people of non-European origin that have had to flee Ukraine and often do not get the same amount of help as those with a Ukrainian passport.

The interviewees criticize these “blind spots” and use their European networks to provide help quickly and without red tape. One interviewee and her NGO were thus able to use their informal contacts in Poland and Ukraine to launch an operation just a few days after the start of the war to help unaccompanied minors cross the border into Poland. Another interviewee reported how she and her team collected a total of one million euros in donations within the space of ten days, which they then passed on directly to Ukrainian aid organizations.

Their tireless dedication to helping people in Ukraine poses huge challenges for risktakers. But even leaving aside the war, many of them are coming under increasing pressure, particularly those that focus on the rights of migrants and the LGBTQ+ community. They mention regular attacks and smear campaigns on social media. But that is not all. The risktakers and their organizations can find themselves facing lawsuits and personal

attacks, too. The consequence is that some of the interviewees report that the stress and heavy workload have a negative impact on their mental health.

“Without the courage, conviction and commitment of risktakers at all levels of our society we won’t be able to solve the huge challenges of our time. But we also recognize that civil society is exhausted after the social and political crises of recent years. We need to take decisive action to counteract that state of affairs,” says Esra Kçük, CEO of the Allianz Foundation.

The exploratory study provides European civil society and its funders with valuable insights and suggestions, including in response to the question of how risktakers’ transnational networks can be used more effectively going forward. The interviews were conducted by the social issue and movement research and advisory firm INFLUENCEISG between March and June 2022. The interviewed risktakers represent NGOs, social organizations and other entities that actively fight for social justice, open societies and a livable planet.

The survey report can be downloaded free of charge [here](#).

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The Allianz Foundation is a non-profit, private foundation under civil law with offices in Berlin. It is an operational and grant-giving foundation and supports projects in the areas of civil society, the environment, and arts and culture. It is active in Europe and the Mediterranean. For more information, visit allianzfoundation.org.