



## Community engagement during wartime: The role of Citizens' Activity Centers

Citizens' activity centers (CAC) are modern spaces for communication between government, business and communities. Forming the lowest territorial unit, in 2022 there were 1469 communities registered in Ukraine. The CAC were established in 2015 to engage and unite active residents living in communities. They intended to vitalise civic engagement at local level by provide local residents with opportunities to hold joint events, to implement their ideas for community's development and to provide them with unlimited access to electronic services.



Since 2015 the Swiss-funded EGAP Program has been working with 40 communities and their residents to cope with humanitarian needs but also to enhance civic participation in community life.

Sustaining citizens' resilience during war time is difficult in any context. In each hromada and for each household, the needs and challenges related to war tend to differ. Those located in Eastern parts of Ukraine experience different existential difficulties than those in the West. In the following brief EGAP shares stories of how different CACs transformed during wartime to serve their communities by continuing to engage active citizens to cope with the war-incited disruptions to their livelihoods and peaceful, vibrant community life.

### Citizen Activity Centers before Russia's war against Ukraine

Following Ukraine's decentralization reforms in 2014, powers of local authorities significantly expanded. The newly formed communities expressed numerous needs. Requests for improvements to education and social infrastructure,

beautification and landscaping of comunal spaces are some that topped the list. It is in this context that the idea of building community hubs where people could get together, organize events or discuss community issues arose.

Given that community-based residents have many needs and requests such as urban renewal projects, improvements to local schools or kindergar-

tens and interest in holding cultural events.

The first Citizen Activity Centre, supported by the EGAP Programme, was inaugurated in the village of Bubniv (Volyn Oblast) in June 2021. Two more Centers were opened later in this oblast while additional ones were rolled out in other parts of Ukraine — e.g. in Vinnytsia (Central Ukraine) and Dnipro (Eastern Ukraine).

**A total of five Citizen Activity Centers are currently operational in Ukraine and four more will be opened shortly.**



Other than the CACs created with support from the EGAP Program, centers for displaced persons are also opened in different parts of Ukraine but typically these are opened in oblast capitals or in larger cities. However, they are mostly set up in large cities and oblast centers. Our Centers focus on helping small communities that had previously lacked convenient and comfortable space for public gatherings.

## How Citizens' Activity Centers changed after February 24



Russia's invasion and occupation of Ukraine since February 2022, however, has significantly changed the purpose of these centers. In the early days of the hostilities, many of the CACs had to recalibrate their activities. Whereas previously they served as spaces where people could gather for a cup of tea and discuss the preparation of a New Year's party in a local kindergarten, during wartime they have become a shelter for civilians as well as a source of moral support and unity among local residents. Residents, volunteers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) not only hid from the war in the CACs but they also used them for diverse forms of self-organisation.

Today, these Centers became facilities for weaving camouflage for Ukrainian troops on the frontlines, for helping displaced persons with legal services and accommodation, for cooking food and distributing warm clothes for servicemen.

Besides, they never forget about their residents and continue their 'pre-war' efforts, such as holding events and activities, albeit adapted to the wartime conditions. These include convening therapy sessions, lessons in Ukrainian language and history, open-air screening of Ukrainian films, etc.

Due to the hard times faced by Ukrainians, the Centers had to shift the focus of their activities; still, their main mission remains unchanged — unite people in small communities.

## Story 1 Natalia, head of the Citizens' Activity Center in Illintsi

Before the war, this hosted meetings of active citizens, events for students, and seminars for cultural figures and educators. When the full-scale war broke out on 24 February 2022, the Center had to be converted into a shelter:

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On the fourth day of the attack, we started weaving camouflage nets for military equipment for the soldiers of Ukrainian Armed Forces. Adults, older persons, and mothers with small children — everybody was weaving. We did it in the corridor and even outside — we worked day and night when there were no air alerts. I remember when a woman with two children came to us from Kharkiv. She asked her children to tear pieces of fabric, and she wove a net at the top — it was a tender moment. We then started making coats of arms of Ukraine as a keepsake for the military because we wanted to thank them for protecting our country. This gift was to warm their souls and to remind them: "You are loved and very much awaited!". Now the Center has resumed its work to implement volunteer civic initiatives: a Ukrainian patriots club, post-traumatic group therapy sessions, open-air cinema showing Ukrainian movies, and so on. The important thing is to be useful and to unite — this is the key to how we can survive this war together!



before February 24

## How Three Citizens' Activity Centers in Vinnytsia Oblast Met the War



after February 24



## Story 2 Tamara, an internally displaced person from Zaporizhzhia Oblast who moved to Viitivtsi

Tamara's family arrived in Viitivtsi village in Vinnytsia Oblast after February 24 with her family — daughter and grandchildren. As it turned out, Tamara spent half of her life working in recreation camps for children. To thank her new host community for their hospitality she offered her skills by teaching local children to make motanka dolls (national Ukrainian folk dolls) as amulets for soldiers of the Armed Forces. This is also a positive way of transferring Ukrainian craftsmanship and heritage from one generation or community to another.

In this process Tamara explained:

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I teach children to create national toys, motanka dolls: 'podorozhnytsi,' 'kubyshky,' and 'ukrainochky.' Each doll comes with a printed prayer and a postcard handmade by children. Our military men have already received more than 400 such toys. Adults also join my workshops. Recently I taught a team at the Citizens' Activity Center to create a sun horse, which in old times brought good luck to Ukrainian Cossacks in battles. The community of Viitivtsi village helped me with housing, so I just couldn't sit idle. Children and I are making amulets for our defenders to support them and bring the country closer to victory!



### Story 3 Eduard, an internally displaced person from Kramatorsk

The Bar hromada is one of the leaders of digitalization in Vinnytsia Oblast. It has a modern Administrative Service Center that offers an e-queue, a place for self-service, a “smart” call center, interactive voice response (IVR) — a form of automated phone system technology and a voice menu. Shortly before February 24, the Bar community planned to implement and mainstream participatory budgeting as an instrument for local civic engagement and community building. However, with the outbreak of the full-scale war the hromada had to change its course and help the inflowing IDPs instead. The Bar hromada was confronted with hosting almost 10,000 IDPs which amounted to a 25% increase of its population. First, the community designated heating spots for them and then created dormitories equipped with all necessities approximately five kilometers from the Bar city. Eduard, who came to the Bar hromada from Kramatorsk at the Eastern war frontlines, lives in one of these dormitories. He is a lawyer and works at the Hromada Development Fund which is a Ukrainian platform that takes care of public initiatives and organizations. Eduard explains about his experience and work in the Bar hromada:



One of the areas of activity of our organization is the rehabilitation of displaced children. That's why when we moved to Bar, we started to give various classes to children: drawing, modeling, archery, etc. Later, we also got the idea to create IT courses — so that children would not only use the computer to play but also learn something about it and to communicate with each other. This kind of interaction is very important for children during wartime when it is common for them to withdraw into themselves and experience depressive episodes. Local authorities provided us with basic equipment and premises, and the EGAP Program helped to arrange a room for digital literacy courses for a group of 25 children. The group includes IDPs but also locals. The course consists of 16 lessons, during which children learn what a computer is, about its graphic design and animation features. In the future, we would like to create IT courses for older persons, where they will be taught to use both computers and smartphones. This will be a good contribution to the community that has become our second home.



Despite the diverse adversities brought upon by the Russian invasion, the EGAP Program has been humbly amazed at the resilience of Ukrainian hromadas. It was also glad to see that the Citizens Activity Centers established by the Program before the war have remained active as important catalysts of community life.

# How to make the Citizens' Activity Centers popular in the hromada

Tips from Oksana Kyrychuk, EGAP Regional Coordinator in Volyn Oblast.

1. **Effectively and frequently inform locals about activities, events, presentations, workshops, sessions, and "gatherings" that you plan to hold.**
2. **Social media is everything!** During war-time when people's mobility is very high, social media is particularly useful for disseminating information. Maximizing the use of digital tools and platforms has proven to be highly effective in CACs! Being active on Facebook and Instagram, and maybe even starting a TikTok account can be also an effective way to attract younger people to your community.
3. **Rearrange your schedule so that you can work on weekends and in the evenings.** The formula is simple: when people are not working, community centers have to work to meet local residents' interests and needs.
4. **Host interesting events for different categories of people: young people, older people, children, parents, flower lovers, etc.**
5. **Invite interesting media personalities known in the hromada, region, or country.**
6. **Make it a tradition to get together "just to have a cup of tea."**
7. **Be open to everyone!**



Citizens' Activity Centers were created by the Swiss-Ukrainian EGAP Program and implemented by East Europe Foundation and Innovabridge Foundation.