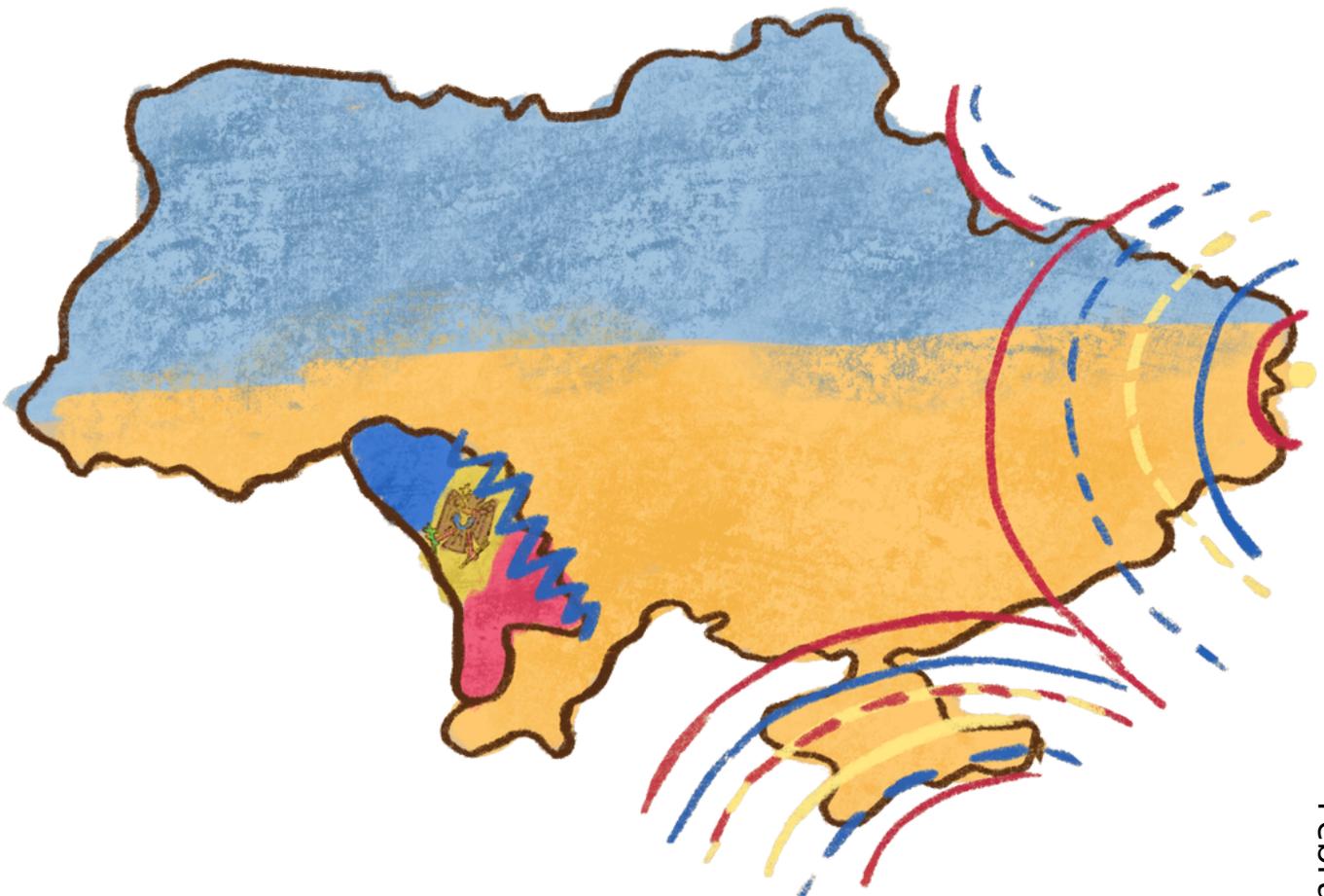




CONTEXT AND CONFLICT ANALYSIS ON UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA

Executive Summary



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Illustrations: Po Sidelnikova

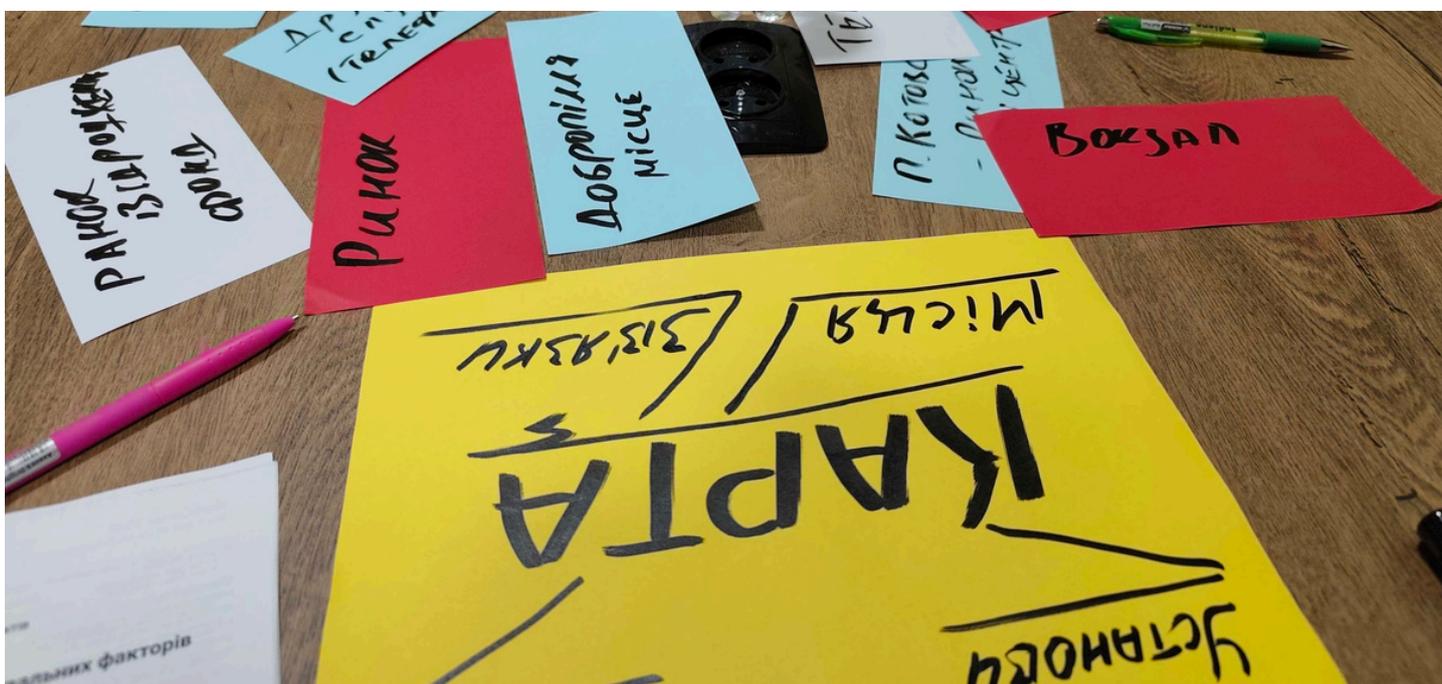
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CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

This conflict and context analysis for Ukraine and Moldova was commissioned by Civil Peace Service (CPS) / GIZ to provide comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of conflict dynamics, peace potentials, and cross-border interlinkages shaping both countries in the current and emerging post-war environment. The study aims to inform strategic planning of the 2026-2029 programme phase and support adaptive, conflict-sensitive, and partner-driven programming.

In Ukraine, the full-scale invasion has deeply altered societal structures, local governance, and civic space. In Moldova, the repercussions of the war, including refugee integration, geopolitical polarization, and social tensions, are reshaping the country's peace and conflict landscape. Understanding how these dynamics intersect is crucial for future CPS engagement across the two contexts.



METHODOLOGY

The study employed a multi-method design integrating qualitative and participatory tools. Data collection included 26 key informants across Ukraine (15), Moldova (9), and covering both contexts (2) with CPS partners, academics, international actors, civil society representatives, journalists, and government representatives. Ten focus group discussions engaged 104 participants representing diverse geographic contexts and social groups including IDPs, veterans, teachers, youth, national minorities, refugees and communities in frontline, border, and autonomous regions.

This research was conducted by a team of local researchers from Ukraine and Moldova whose lived experience and cultural familiarity fundamentally shaped understanding and engagement with communities. The report was produced under conditions of massive energy constraints resulting from Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure, with researchers conducting interviews and analysis during extended power outages. These conditions are not merely logistical footnotes but material reminders that knowledge production occurs within, not above, the conflicts we seek to understand.



Figure 1. Focus group discussions locations



KEY FINDINGS

Communities in Ukraine and Moldova navigate peacebuilding through a tension between international donor terminology and lived experience. In Ukraine, the term "peacebuilding" among the general population remains politically charged, perceived as implying premature reconciliation with Russia, while "social cohesion" offers a more workable alternative for practitioners focused on building trust and inclusion from the ground up. Both contexts reveal how dominant frameworks often rely on abstracted categories like reconciling "Chişinău" and "Tiraspol" as homogenous entities, or applying transferable "best practices" that obscure differentiated local realities. Practitioners call for approaches grounded in concrete social interfaces and everyday cooperation rather than abstract reconciliation narratives, particularly during active conflict when premature framing risks ethical harm and strategic misalignment.

For communities under war, peace begins viscerally as the cessation of violence, but extends to relational quality and inclusive social contracts made visible through accessible infrastructure and spatial organization. Justice varies by lived experience: Ukrainian communities, especially military-related, frame it around mobilization and victory, while both in Ukraine and Moldova it was also associated with corruption accountability, fair employment opportunities, and dismantling patronage networks (mainly mentioned in Moldova). The following analysis examines how these conceptual gaps manifest in programming approaches, institutional mechanisms, and the contested spaces where memory politics, psychosocial needs, and strategic transformation intersect under conditions of prolonged violence.

UKRAINE

Mental health must precede conflict resolution

The majority of Ukrainians have experienced trauma to varying degrees. Practitioners emphasize that psychological wellbeing must be established as the primary foundation before traditional conflict resolution work. Teachers face cumulative professional and emotional overload, expected to remain emotionally attentive to children while lacking sufficient personal resources themselves.

"The main question is where to find the energy to pass on to children – positive energy – without showing that you yourself are exhausted." – Teacher, focus group participant

Divergent war experiences create profound divides

The stark differentiation in how Ukrainians experience the war generates profound questions of legitimacy and moral authority. In cities like Dnipro, diverse populations with radically different experiences have converged including veterans, internally displaced persons, residents who volunteer, those who contribute financially, and those who do neither. This creates constant division into different types of Ukrainians based on who suffered to what extent and who is involved in the war.

"A supposedly military person in uniform approaches you, a war invalid, and starts bragging to you that he escaped from the TCC [recruitment center], telling you how clever he is... People don't understand this." – Veteran, Vinnytsia oblast, Ukraine.

Trust erosion towards state institutions

Only a handful of social institutions retain public confidence, and the government is not among them. This trust deficit operates between citizens and central authorities, between local governments and residents, and increasingly among citizens themselves. Recent tracking shows that by December 2024, trust in the Government had fallen to 20% and trust in the Verkhovna Rada to 13%, whereas trust in volunteers remained at 81% and trust in the Defense Forces at 92%.

"Trust in society is absent now. This resource of trust is almost completely exhausted. There are only a few social institutions in Ukraine where this trust still holds. And the government is not on that list." – Civil society actor, Ukraine

Absence of compelling vision for post-war future

The state's failure to articulate a compelling vision of Ukraine's future leaves society exhausted not merely by war itself, but by the inability to see where sacrifices are leading. Without a shared vision, society fragments into competing groups pursuing narrow interests. Respondents anticipate that post-war challenges, including reconciliation, economic recovery, and addressing accumulated grievances, may prove more divisive than the war itself.

"Society is very tired of the war. And tired not so much from the war itself, but from the state's inability to communicate a vision of the future... When people have a shared vision of the future and they share that vision, it's much easier for them to unite and endure difficult times." – Civil society actor, Ukraine

Information warfare systematically exploits societal divisions

Russian influence operations identify authentic tensions and systematically deepen them through coordinated information campaigns. Rather than promoting specific viewpoints, operatives simply amplify any conflict, using bot networks to boost critical posts about any political figure or policy, creating an atmosphere of generalized grievance and cynicism. Prolonged stress and war fatigue diminish critical thinking capacity.

"The catalyst is the Russians; they very actively try to work with it, simply inflating things... they stopped conducting targeted campaigns, and instead they maximally activated their bots to inflate any conflictual post. As soon as criticism appears somewhere, it immediately gets amplified on the internet." – Civil society actor, Ukraine

MOLDOVA

Deep geopolitical polarization which threatens stability

The full-scale Russian invasion forced Moldovans to choose sides on previously ambiguous geopolitical questions. Society split from the outset between those supporting Ukraine and those sympathizing with Russia, with these divisions penetrating families and creating taboo topics. Electoral results on European integration revealed an almost even split in society, with the Moldovan Orthodox Church providing institutional support for pro-Russian narratives through approximately 80% of parishes under Russian Patriarchate jurisdiction.

"A huge number of my personal acquaintances and many other people say that we in the family don't talk about the war in Ukraine, because our positions are diametrically opposed." – Academic and policy expert, Moldova

Transnistria faces cascading economic deterioration

Deterioration of Transnistria's important revenue source, electricity generation and sales to Moldova, is triggering cascading systemic failures. Without gas supplies, the Moldavian GRES cannot generate power, causing factories to shut down, mass unemployment, inability to pay taxes or salaries, and comprehensive economic collapse. Institutional degradation is visible across healthcare, social services, and basic infrastructure.

"Transnistria's main income came from electricity generation and selling it to Moldova. Now there's no profit, that's why there's a state of emergency, that's why everything became much-much worse because the main income fell." – Transnistria resident, Moldova

Language remains emotionally charged fault line

The failure to achieve harmonious bilingualism over 30 years has created deep resentment. In Gagauzia and Taraclia, the majority of the population does not speak Romanian at all. Russian-speaking citizens struggle to access government services and navigate official documentation, while Romanian-speakers perceive continued Russian monolingualism as political defiance rather than practical constraint.

"The majority of the population [in Gagauzia and Taraclia] does not speak Romanian at all. And discussions in the expert community were that this is a stance of resistance by Russian-speakers and an expectation that Russia will still rise, stand up from its knees and take back what once belonged to it." – Academic and policy expert, Moldova

Socioeconomic insecurity drives vulnerability

Economic precarity creates conditions where resource competition overrides solidarity. Energy costs became a particular flashpoint, with the expensive transition to the EU energy platform creating immediate hardship that citizens experience viscerally. The gap between income levels is growing, creating effectively separate social worlds. People in Chişinău and those in small rural villages exist in fundamentally different worlds with divergent access to services, employment, information, and political influence.

"A person with an income of 2-3 thousand euros and a person with an income of 5 thousand lei are in different worlds... The division of society by income level – it was always large, but it's gradually growing. The distance between each cluster is very large, and it's widening." – Academic and policy expert, Moldova

Information manipulation operates with impunity

Moldova faces full-spectrum information assault operating with freedom difficult in wartime Ukraine. TikTok emerged as a particularly problematic platform with minimal regulation allowing blatant lies to proliferate. Pro-Russian channels operate continuously, and when blocked, they reappear under new names within hours, demonstrating coordinated efforts and state-level resources.

"Pro-Russian and anti-Moldovan propaganda never stops for a minute on Gagauz social media channels. Even if some accounts are blocked, they appear within 24 hours under new names and continue their work." – Journalist, Moldova

CROSS-BORDER DYNAMICS

Parallel European integration as cooperation opportunity

Moldova and Ukraine's shared European integration trajectories create a natural framework for enhanced cooperation. Both countries face similar challenges with differentiated capacities. Ukrainian civil society has developed expertise in grant writing and understanding of international consultative structures, while Moldova's smaller size has enabled advancement in specialized areas like disability rights, where Moldovan civic actors now offer expertise to Ukrainian counterparts.

"When we started in Ukraine to work with disabilities before the war, we were in shock that because Moldova is small, we've managed to go so much further in the disability field... So now colleagues with disabilities are offering expertise to their colleagues working in the disability field in Ukraine." – Representative of international non-governmental organisations, Moldova

Ukrainian refugee integration demonstrates both solidarity and emerging tensions

Moldova's initial wave of solidarity toward Ukrainian refugees has evolved into growing resentment driven by economic insecurity and perceived preferential treatment. Local populations with limited incomes observe refugees receiving aid from international organizations, generating feelings of abandonment. The presence of Ukrainian refugees impacted housing markets, labor dynamics, and service access, requiring ongoing adaptation.

"Initially there was a large flow of refugees and people helped, but over time there is growing conflict and indignation because many local people have low incomes. They also barely make ends meet. And refugees currently receive help from various organizations. And this conflict between them is growing more and more." – Transnistria resident, Moldova.

Civil society cooperation

Joint opportunities exist around Roma inclusion, peacebuilding, people with disabilities inclusion, psychological support, and civic identity-building. Moldova's deeper challenge remains forging a coherent civic nation from a divided society — a process Ukraine accelerated through the hardships of war, but which Moldova may pursue through alternative pathways.

"The most important point is the formation of a civic nation. We can be different, with different views, different preferences, different ideas about where our country is going — but there are some fundamental values that we defend precisely because we are this country, otherwise we will not become one." — Academic and policy expert, Moldova



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR UKRAINE

- 1 Establish mental health and psychosocial support as the primary foundation for all programming, ensuring trauma-informed approaches permeate all interventions with particular attention to educational institutions.
- 2 Support approaches recognizing complexity of choices made under occupation or displacement, addressing practical barriers to reintegration through systematic investment in accessible infrastructure.
- 3 Work through actors with genuine social legitimacy including civil society organizations, local media, and volunteer networks.
- 4 Support civil society in articulating positive futures through dialogue processes and platforms where diverse voices contribute to reconstruction conversations.
- 5 Develop integrated communication strategies supporting solution-oriented journalism and campaigns addressing information gaps.

FOR MOLDOVA

- 1 Facilitate strategic dialogue bringing pro-European and skeptical voices into structured conversation on specific issues rather than abstract reconciliation.
- 2 Prepare for eventual Transnistria reintegration scenarios through professional exchange programs and humanitarian coordination maintaining human connections despite political separation.
- 3 Support approaches protecting minority rights robustly enough to eliminate incentives for external powers to position themselves as protectors.
- 4 Ensure programming addresses material conditions alongside social cohesion, recognizing that economic grievances drive conflict.
- 5 Support media literacy initiatives and constructive journalism while recognizing structural challenges peacebuilding messages face.

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

- 1 Facilitate mutual learning leveraging complementarities through structured knowledge exchange forums, mentorship programmes, and joint projects on Roma inclusion and disability rights.
- 2 Support humanitarian projects deliberately including local populations as beneficiaries to reduce refugee-host tensions.
- 3 Foster community-to-community partnerships enabling practical cooperation and relationship building across borders.



Open Space Works Ukraine (OSWU) is a women-led social enterprise – ethically driven and purpose-oriented – that combines research and participatory facilitation. We operate with a clear social mission to advance inclusive and community-driven approaches in humanitarian and development practice and derive resources into scaling to strengthen local leadership and knowledge generation in Eastern Europe.

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