UNCOVERING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE NEW DEMOCRACIES OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: LOCAL RESPONSES TO DISPLACEMENT FROM UKRAINE AFTER THE FULL-SCALE RUSSIAN INVASION

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Abstract
This article examines how local governments and civic actors in Central and Eastern Europe responded to the 2022 displacement crisis, challenging dominant narratives of democratic weakness in the region. Using comparative case studies of Gdańsk (Poland) and Võru (Estonia), it explores how "hidden citizen energies" emerged through bottom-up mobilisation and municipal–civil society cooperation. Adopting a relational and crisis-sensitive perspective on civil society and multi-level migration governance, the analysis reveals the dynamic, "pulsating" nature of civic engagement under crisis conditions. In Gdańsk, pre-existing integration frameworks enabled swift and coordinated humanitarian action, while in Võru, spontaneous community initiatives compensated for institutional gaps. Despite differences in scale and capacity, both cities illustrate how localities can act as resilient governance nodes, turning citizen solidarity into effective response and strengthening democratic resilience amid disruption.

1. Introduction

The narrative that democracy is in crisis seems widespread in numerous areas and subfields of social sciences. One of the most recurring themes in recent years is how migration affects and is affected by the crisis of democracy (Anderson, 2019; Penninx et al., 2014; Ruzza, 2018; Scott, 2012; Skelcher et al., 2013). The region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is especially affected by nationalist politics fuelled by the migration crisis, where revanchist identity politics and ontological insecurity are employed by nationalist actors and lead to the installation of illiberal institutions and the spread of anti-EU attitudes (Cichocki & Jabkowski, 2020; Drozdzewski & Matusz, 2021; Jakobson et al., 2021; Scott, 2019). However, such optics often neglect the idea that crisis is not merely a rupture but a regular condition of political life—and that democracy offers resources for resilience and renewal.

In this article, we explore Bob Jessop's observations on how the failures and limitations of modern democratic governments and governance can be offset by skilfully integrating civil society into crisis management institutions (Jessop, 2020). The article uses the example of the crisis caused by the large-scale displacement following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 to examine how civic engagement and local governance in CEE countries function as democratic responses to crisis. During the initial phase of the influx of forcibly displaced people, the critical situation in the receiving countries was mitigated due to a massive participation from civil society, but long-term and stable crisis management also needs the involvement of local and national governments. This itself is a significant challenge to the stability of political institutions

The purpose of the study is to investigate how local actors, both institutional and civic, mobilized in response to this humanitarian crisis and what this reveals about the nature of civil society in post-socialist democracies. The scope of the study focuses on two contrasting urban contexts: Gdańsk, a large metropolitan centre in Poland with pre-existing migrant integration structures, and Võru, a small, peripheral town in Estonia characterised by community cohesion and responsive governance. Through these comparative case studies, the article explores the extent to which localized civic action can compensate for the limitations of state-led responses and foster democratic resilience in times of acute disruption.

Guided by the relational and crisis-sensitive conceptualization of civil society (Jessop, 2020; Peck, 2023), the study is grounded in the following hypotheses:

1. Crisis situations can act as triggers for the episodic activation of civil society, even in contexts often labeled as democratic backsliders.
2. Localities with strong civic traditions or institutional preparedness are better equipped to translate citizen solidarity into effective governance responses.
3. Multi-level governance frameworks that incorporate bottom-up civic energy contribute to more resilient and democratic crisis management.

An effective response to crises—whether caused by war, migration, pandemics, or climate change—requires cooperation across governance levels and stakeholder groups (Bache et al., 2022; Jessop, 2004; Klinke, 2017). Particularly in the CEE context, the input of civil society at the local level was essential during the early phase of the Ukrainian displacement. Yet its integration into long-term institutional frameworks is what ultimately sustains democratic resilience.

2. Theoretical context

This study is framed within two theoretical contexts: the concept of civil society as relational, emergent and sensitive to crises (Jessop, 2020; Peck, 2022), and studies and interpretations of multi-level governance in times of migration and integration challenges arising from crises (Bache et al., 2022; OECD, 2022; Czerska-Shaw & Kubicki, 2023; Magdziarz, 2024).

2.1. Civil Society and Citizen Energies in Times of Crisis

The time of crisis intensifying and accelerating the experience of everyday life in an extreme way creates uniquely intense environment that shows communities in violent action. This situation generates extraordinary circumstances of the rising, the life, and the disappearance of the phenomenon of civil society. A crisis lens magnifies the phenomenological emergence of civil society. An analogy can be found in the results of research on the processes of formation and operation of archipelagic civil society (Peck 2023). The uniqueness of the conditions, isolation of the "normal" situation reveals the mechanisms shaping the phenomenon of civil society. Both observations, our related to the time of crisis and Peck's related to the space of archipelagic geography shift the centre of gravity in defining the nature of civil society from subjective categorization to the relational nature of the phenomenon.

This opens a space for discussion on the nature of civil society. Jessop addresses the dilemma concerning the ontological or purely epistemological character of the concept of civil society with the question whether civil society is an autonomous domain of social life or comprises no more than a heterogeneous set of social relations that are not dominated by other institutional orders (Jessop 2020, 2). Applying the crisis lens accentuates that the role of place and time is much stronger in shaping civil society phenomenon than any institutional and organizational efforts and activities. The essence of a civil society understood in this way results in its ephemeral and changeable nature.

With the relational definition of the phenomenon of civil society, it is possible to understand and explain the states of its periodical «dormancy» resulting from the lack of stimulating incentives. It is rather the systemic top-down need for a stable and predictable operation of civil society, seen as an element of the stabilized democracy. As such civil society is a structurally incorporated element of different forms of governance. The historical experience of CEE reveals that the «pulsating» nature of the civil society's activities stands in an opposition to structurally fossilized definitions of it. It is the relationship between the state, the market and citizens that in each place and time causes civil society to be formed on a different scale, with a different intensity and durability, as well as with a different level of institutionalization and organizational order.

2.2. Flexible governance for migration and integration, and for building crisis resilience

A large body of work explores how migration and refugee flows are entangled with democratic (or illiberal) politics. In CEE, the rise of nationalist populism, ontological insecurity and anti-EU attitudes have been linked to migration politics and the construction of the "Other" (Cichocki & Jabkowski, 2020; Drozdzewski & Matusz, 2021; Scott, 2019). On the one hand, migration is portrayed as a threat to liberal democracy; on the other hand, crisis-driven citizen mobilisations offer democratic openings. Scholars argue that democracies in transition cannot simply assume the self-sufficiency of civil society or local government—they require deliberate institutional embedding and multi-level cooperation.

As the European Union's migration regime matured, attention shifted to the "governance of integration"—that is, how state, local and non-state actors jointly manage migrant reception, integration and inclusion (Penninx et al., 2014). In the CEE urban post-2015 context, projects such as MigIntegrEast emphasise that local conditions (such as city size, migration history, civil society networks) shape integration governance in ways distinct from Western Europe. For example, local studies in Poland (e.g., Matusz, 2020) show how cities have developed integration policies independent of national migration discourse.

In addition, research on multi-level governance emphasises that integration is rarely implemented solely at the national level; rather, local and regional governments play a critical role (see OECD, 2022). The OECD identifies significant "gaps" in multi-level governance — information, capacity, fiscal, administrative, policy, objective, accountability and participatory gaps — which challenge effective coordination across levels of government.

In the CEE context, scholars such as Magdziarz (2024) apply the multi-level governance (MLG) framework to illustrate how local governments' policy-making engagement alongside central government can expand in contexts of migration shocks. The "local turn" in migration governance also highlights that cities and municipalities may act ahead of or in contrast to national policy (Lukešová, 2024).

Urban scholarship emphasises that integration is not only about national policy but also about how cities, neighbourhoods and local actors respond. The concept of urban resilience has been applied to migration: cities must absorb shocks, adapt and transform (Czerska-Shaw & Kubicki, 2023). Local governments that possess prior institutional experience, municipal capacities and participatory governance structures tend to perform better in emergencies (Matusz & Pawlak, 2020).

In CEE municipalities, bottom-up citizen engagement—through NGOs, volunteer groups, neighbourhood networks—has been identified as a crucial pillar of crisis response. However, these citizen energies often remain unrecognised in the mainstream migration governance discourse. The literature emphasises the importance of bridging levels of governance—involving citizen networks, municipal governance, regional authorities and the EU level (Bache et al., 2022; Jessop, 2004; Klinke, 2017). The pulsating nature of civil society as an element of governance, the heterogeneity of its constellation and ways of operating confirm the constantly incomplete structure of every form of governance and consequently is one of the key elements of governance failure as Jessop explains. Therefore, resistant governance should not only be open to the inclusion of irregularly born civil society activities, but its structure and mechanisms of action should remain flexible and able to absorb the pulsating grassroots initiatives of civil society.

Despite the wealth of literature on migration governance, civil society and local government, significant gaps remain—particularly in the CEE context and in the specific scenario of a large-scale refugee influx triggered by war. Firstly, empirical studies on citizen mobilisations in response to war-driven refugees in CEE cities are still limited. Secondly, the relational dynamics between spontaneous citizen initiatives and formal governance structures under acute crisis remain under-analysed—how does a municipal system absorb, institutionalise, or discard citizen energies? Thirdly, there is a shortage of comparative work across very different urban settings (large city vs small town) that explores how local governance capacity interacts with citizen mobilisation. This study therefore addresses these gaps by comparing the large urban case of Gdańsk and the much smaller town of Võru, focusing on local responses to the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis.

3. Data and Methods

The outstandingly high inflow of people displaced from Ukraine who arrived in Poland and Estonia after 24th February 2022 followed from several factors, including geographical and cultural proximity between the three countries (Komornicki et al., 2023; Witt et al., 2023), the already existing Ukrainian diasporas (Łaźniewska et al., 2023; Veebel and Ploom, 2023), as well as the EU membership of Poland and Estonia, granting the migrants access to labour markets, accommodation, education, health and social services on the basis of Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) ("Council Directive 2001/55/EC," 2001; Jauhiainen and Erbsen, 2023; Pędziwiatr and Magdziarz, 2023). The considerable scale of this forced in-migration makes Polish and Estonian cities particularly interesting research laboratories, especially given their common historical transition from socialist-planned cities to autonomous urban units in new democracies.

The reasons behind the specific choice of Gdańsk and Võru as case studies are twofold. Firstly, they are both urban areas with preeminent bottom-up early responses to the forcible displacement crisis, standing in contrast with feeble and/or postponed reactions at the central level. Secondly, despite the difference in size between the almost half a million city of Gdańsk and Võru town with a population of only 12,000, we find similarities between both urban centres, regarding the national and supranational socio-political contexts, as well as the impact of historical background on the recent events.

Gdańsk, the largest city in northern Poland with a population of around 490,000, is one of the country's most dynamic urban economies, driven by its diversified structure that combines a strong maritime and logistics sector with rapidly developing industries in technology, business services, and tourism. Võru, on the other hand, a small town in southeastern Estonia, represents a peripheral yet socially vibrant urban context, where local identity, community cohesion, and innovative approaches to well-being and inclusion have gained importance amid demographic challenges and spatial inequalities.

Both cities have deep-rooted tradition of civic engagement. Gdańsk is recognized most notably as the birthplace of the Solidarity movement that catalysed democratic transformation across Central and Eastern Europe. This historical legacy continues to shape the city's strong culture of social activism, participatory governance, and community-oriented policymaking (Grabkowska and Makowska, 2011). Correspondingly, Võru offers an insightful example of local resilience and civic self-organization rooted in strong community ties and peripheral adaptability. This capacity was vividly demonstrated during the severe autumn storm of 2019, when widespread blackouts and communication breakdowns forced residents, volunteers, and local institutions to develop improvised crisis-management solutions in the absence of adequate state response (Medar et al., 2020). The episode underscored the community's ability to mobilize rapidly and collaboratively under pressure—a trait shaped by Estonia's broader traditions of local self-governance and collective problem-solving dating back to the interwar period and reinforced through contemporary rural innovation and digital civic culture.

The empirical material on local responses to the mass displacement from Ukraine in Gdańsk and Võru was gathered through a qualitative, multi-method approach combining desk research and participant observation. The desk research encompassed a systematic review and content analysis of municipal policy documents, reports from local authorities and NGOs, media coverage, and relevant academic publications in order to reconstruct the institutional, social, and discursive context of the responses. Complementing this secondary analysis, the authors' own observations were derived from direct involvement in volunteer and community initiatives that emerged in both cities in the early months of the crisis.

This experiential engagement provided valuable insights into the everyday practices of local actors, informal coordination mechanisms, and the dynamics of solidarity at the grassroots level. By triangulating these sources, the study aimed to capture both the structural and affective dimensions of local governance and civic mobilization, offering a nuanced understanding of how municipalities and communities

responded to the unprecedented inflow of forcibly displaced people.

4. Results and Discussion

In the immediate aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, both Poland and Estonia faced an unprecedented influx of forcibly displaced people seeking temporary shelter and safety. The magnitude and suddenness of this movement confronted local societies and institutions with challenges for which no prior structures or procedures had been fully prepared.

In Gdańsk, over the last decade, the local context had been characterized by a stable and proactive approach to migrant integration, shaped primarily by the city's own governance structures rather than national policy. The Gdańsk Immigrant Integration Model ("Immigrant Integration Model," 2016) functioned as a pioneering, bottom-up initiative that effectively facilitated the inclusion of foreign residents. Its locally driven character demonstrated the capacity of municipal authorities and civil society actors to develop coherent integration policies independent of central government intervention. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this pre-existing institutional framework became a crucial foundation for a rapid and coordinated response to the new influx of refugees. The city, which had previously managed gradual inflows of immigrants, suddenly faced an unprecedented humanitarian challenge as thousands of displaced Ukrainians sought protection. While the number of crossing of the Ukrainian-Polish border reached around 3 million by the end of May 2022, Gdańsk was the third most frequently chosen urban destination in Poland after Warsaw and Wrocław (Wojdat and Cywiński, 2022). It has been estimated that in July 2022 Ukrainians constituted 14 percent of the local population of Gdańsk ("How did cities welcome," 2023). In this context, the Gdańsk Immigrant Integration Model—originally designed for long-term integration—was rapidly adapted to address immediate emergency needs.

In contrast to Gdańsk's metropolitan scale, Võru—a small town in southeastern Estonia—faced the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine within a distinctly local and rural context. Although lacking extensive institutional structures for migrant integration, the community demonstrated a strong capacity for rapid self-organization and civic responsiveness, rooted in traditions of local solidarity and mutual aid. The initial arrival of displaced Ukrainians in 2022 was modest in scale compared to larger Estonian cities such as Tallinn or Tartu, yet it presented significant challenges for a municipality with limited administrative and welfare resources. Drawing on existing networks of local NGOs, schools, and cultural associations, Võru's residents and municipal authorities collaborated closely to provide emergency assistance, housing, and social support, often relying on informal coordination and interpersonal trust rather than formalized procedures. This bottom-up mobilization echoed earlier examples of collective action—such as the community-led crisis management during the 2019 storm-induced blackout—illustrating how local resilience and improvisation compensate for structural limitations in peripheral regions.

To assess the level and forms of civic engagement during this initial phase of crisis response, it is essential to consider how various actors across multiple levels of governance—from local authorities and municipal agencies to non-governmental organizations, grassroots initiatives, and individual citizens—became involved in addressing urgent humanitarian needs. Understanding these interactions in the cities under study offers valuable insight into how civil societies in Poland and Estonia mobilized, adapted, and cooperated under the pressure of a large-scale displacement crisis. An overview of responses at different levels of governance is presented in Table 1.

In both Gdańsk and Võru, the immediate aftermath of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine triggered extensive civic mobilization characterized by bottom-up initiatives and strong displays of solidarity. In Gdańsk, citizens spontaneously established collection points across the city—initially to support the Ukrainian army and subsequently to gather humanitarian aid for displaced civilians. University students, community members, and employees in various workplaces took the lead in organizing and distributing aid, reflecting a highly decentralized and citizen-driven model of response. Similarly, in Võru, community members rapidly initiated local fundraising efforts and organized collections of essential goods such as clothing, food, and hygiene products. Residents volunteered their homes to host refugees, while local networks facilitated transportation from the Ukrainian-Polish border. In both contexts, citizens' actions preceded institutional involvement, highlighting the critical role of grassroots engagement in addressing urgent humanitarian needs.

In Gdańsk, municipal authorities complemented these civic efforts by establishing official reception and help points, including at the city's main train station, where displaced people from Ukraine could access information, translation assistance, and temporary shelter. The local government also coordinated the opening of a temporary hotel for emergency

Tab. 1. Local responses to displacement from Ukraine in Võru and Gdansk by actors involved between 24th February and 31st May 2022

Category	Gdańsk	Võru
Civil / Citizen		
Individual responses	Housing offered by citizens (accommodation provided in private homes, flats rented at reduced rates) Transports from the border in private cars Donations of food, clothing, hygiene items	Citizens opened their homes ("my Ukrainians") Donations of food, clothing, essentials Volunteers in logistics and fundraising
Group initiatives	Aid collections organized by student volunteers at local universities Workplace and community centre initiatives (collection of goods and organisation of transport) Grassroots fundraising and donation drives	Community-led fundraising and logistics (collecting supplies, organizing transport to/from border) Coordination of help and integration events by local community networks
Local Government		
City authorities	Set up of helpdesks and reception points (e.g., at the main train station) Provision of interpreting, accommodation, and information services Set up of a temporary accommodation shelters Support in school and library adaptations for Ukrainians	Cooperation with community centre in early response Support in coordination of aid distribution Continued partnership with local civic actors
District councils	Assistance in managing local collection and distribution points Coordination of volunteers at neighbourhood level	Limited formal district-level role (small municipality structure)
Regional Governmen		
	Coordination of municipalities in the region and provision of logistical support Facilitation of communication between local governments	Minimal but targeted coordination support Help in channelling national resources to municipalities
Central Government		
Central level	Introduction of legal framework for TPD (adoption of the Special-purpose Act of 12 March 2022 on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens) Support for public institutions in adaptation (education, housing)	Implementation of TPD on 9 March 2022 Organization of national-level transport and registries for housing offers Provision of funding mechanisms for local initiatives
Regional office	Overseeing of compliance with national support policies Coordination of administrative aspects of assistance	Liaison with municipalities to distribute state support Mainly an intermediary role
Local NGOs and Other Formal Civil Society Groups		
NGOs	Collaboration with volunteers and municipality to provide psychological, social, and integration support Partnership with local authorities for long-term inclusion programs	Extending their roles as both NGOs and social enterprises Coordination of logistics, integration activities, and vocational opportunities
Other formal civil society groups	Activities and events in schools, universities, libraries restructured to host and integrate people from Ukraine Community events organized by cultural institutions	Local community centre as a hub for local associations and initiatives Space and support for small business activities of entrepreneurs displaced from Ukraine
Local Businesses		
	Humanitarian and logistical support providing food, shelter, and transportation (smaller companies particularly active in grassroots efforts, larger ones – in in-kind contributions)	Donations of goods and services Affordable accommodation and logistics support
International Actorst		
The EU	Activation of the TPD on 4 March 2022	
Other	Aid and expertise provided by partner cities and international organizations Cross-border academic and NGO collaborations supporting integration programs	Limited direct engagement Indirect support through Estonia's participation in EU and NATO assistance frameworks

Source: Own elaboration

accommodation and restructured public institutions to accommodate Ukrainian children in schools.

In Võru, the local municipality collaborated closely with community actors, particularly with the Saagu Parem community centre, which transformed into an improvised refugee logistics and coordination hub. Although local authorities later formalized coordination mechanisms, the municipality continued to rely on existing community networks, thus maintaining a hybrid model of governance based on partnership between public and civic actors.

The role of regional authorities varied between the cities. In Gdańsk, they supported the coordination of relief logistics and integration initiatives by linking municipalities and providing administrative support for reception centres. Their involvement ensured consistency across the broader Pomeranian region. In contrast, Võru received limited but targeted regional-level support. Coordination mainly focused on facilitating communication between municipalities and distributing national resources, with regional actors playing a more intermediary than direct role.

In the initial response to the situation, the central government sought to implement provisional solutions to address the deficiencies in institutional infrastructure. In Poland, these efforts were mostly limited to implementation of the TPD framework, which enabled municipalities to provide financial assistance and public services to forcibly displaced people from Ukraine. In Estonia, national authorities organized transport and funding mechanisms and launched national-level registries for private accommodation offers. However, both cases demonstrate that state-led responses lagged behind the immediacy of local civil and municipal actions, which initially filled critical gaps in official preparedness.

Local NGOs and other formal civil society groups were instrumental in the establishing of the early response system. In Gdańsk, formal NGOs and associations quickly integrated into the humanitarian network, working alongside volunteer groups to deliver aid, provide psychological support, and facilitate social integration programs. In Võru, the Saagu Parem community centre functioned as both a social enterprise and a civil society organization, acting as a central node for coordination, logistics, and later integration activities such as community events and vocational workshops for refugees. Both cases underline the pivotal role of civil society organizations as mediators between citizens and government institutions.

The local businesses played a relatively smaller, but supporting role. In Gdańsk they contributed by donating goods, providing logistical support, and offering discounted housing and services to refugees.

Similarly, in Võru, small enterprises supported fundraising and supplied materials to the community centre. In both localities, the private sector demonstrated social responsibility and reinforced community resilience.

The most significant response from international actors can be attributed to the EU's implementation of the TPD, as previously outlined in the introduction. However, on a smaller scale, some other organisations also contributed to providing help on a local level in the case-study cities. In Gdańsk, international linkages—particularly with partner cities and foreign-based organizations—facilitated the flow of humanitarian aid and expertise. Universities and NGOs benefited from cross-border collaborations to expand integration programs. Võru's smaller scale limited direct international involvement, but the town benefited indirectly from Estonia's participation in EU and NATO frameworks, which provided funding and coordination for refugee assistance at the national level.

In summary, both Gdańsk and Võru exemplify locally driven humanitarian governance rooted in civic initiative and multi-level cooperation. While Gdańsk's response was characterized by urban scale, institutional capacity, and formalized municipal leadership, Võru's experience highlighted the strength of small-community networks and the adaptability of hybrid civic–municipal partnerships. Together, they illustrate diverse yet complementary models of local resilience within the broader European response to the displacement crisis.

The experiences of the migration crisis triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have demonstrated the extraordinary capacity of citizens to mobilize and form dynamic civil society movements. These events have served not only as tests of institutional readiness but also as catalysts for civic activation, revealing that ordinary people, when faced with acute disruption, are capable of organizing, coordinating, and delivering aid on a massive scale. As evidenced by the analysed cases of Poland and Estonia, civil society has emerged not as a secondary or supplementary actor, but as a strategic pillar within crisis governance procedures. In both contexts, grassroots initiatives filled critical gaps in institutional responses, particularly in the early phases of the refugee influx.

The strength of these efforts lay not in formal structures, but in their flexibility, relational networks, and capacity to rapidly respond to evolving needs. Furthermore, these bottom-up mobilizations were often later absorbed and supported by local authorities, creating hybrid models of governance that combined civic energy with public administration.

Thanks to these adaptive and often improvised forms of cooperation, civil society was able to contribute to the outcomes that would have been unattainable through top-down institutional channels alone, demonstrating not only solidarity, but also a form of democratic resilience rooted in participation, mutual aid, and local agency.

5. Conclusions

The study explores how civic engagement and local governance in CEE responded to the 2022 Ukrainian large-scale displacement crisis, challenging assumptions of democratic fragility in the region. By comparing two distinct urban contexts: Gdańsk in Poland and Võru in Estonia—the research illustrates how local actors mobilized to manage the displacement emergency following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The analysis demonstrates that crisis situations act as powerful catalysts for civic engagement, particularly in regions like CEE, where civil society is often perceived as weak or dormant. Rather than reflecting a lack of democratic vitality, the authors argue that civil society in these contexts operates episodically, mobilizing with significant intensity in response to acute disruptions.

The case of Gdańsk illustrates the resilience and adaptability of local governance mechanisms in times of crisis, where local authorities, NGOs, and volunteers mobilized existing institutional networks to provide housing, education, healthcare, and psychosocial support. Importantly, the city's prior experience with inclusive governance and partnership-based policymaking allowed for an agile and coordinated response, contrasting with the often slower, more bureaucratic reactions at the national level.

In contrast, Võru in Estonia, despite being a small town with limited institutional capacity, demonstrated a different but equally impactful model of crisis response. Rooted in strong local identity, community cohesion, and mutual aid, Võru's response was largely shaped by spontaneous, grassroots initiatives. The community's experience during earlier crises—such as the 2019 storm blackout—fostered a culture of improvisational resilience, social innovation and collective problem-solving, which proved crucial during the forced immigration crisis. Together, these cases illustrate that both well-institutionalized urban centres and smaller, resource-constrained municipalities can play vital roles as resilient governance nodes, provided they are able to harness and channel citizen energy effectively.

Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of multi-level governance structures that integrate bottom-up civic initiatives with formal local and regional coordination. Both cities demonstrated that when local authorities work in close collaboration with citizens, NGOs, and civil society actors, they can compensate for the gaps in national-level responses. While central governments in both Poland and Estonia introduced necessary legal and funding mechanisms, their responses often lagged behind the immediate needs met by civic and municipal actions. This underscores a recurring governance gap in crisis contexts, where agile local responses outpace more bureaucratic national systems.

The findings reinforce the concept of a «pulsating» civil society—one that is not continuously active but surges into visibility and influence when prompted by crisis. Drawing on relational theories of governance, the authors argue that resilience in new democracies hinges not solely on formal institutions but on their capacity to remain flexible, open, and responsive to the irregular rhythms of grassroots mobilization. Civil society, in this view, is not a fixed domain but a dynamic field of action shaped by relational forces, time-sensitive conditions, and place-based responses.

The research concludes that civil society in CEE is far from absent—it is episodic, relational, and shaped by crisis. Both Gdańsk and Võru demonstrate how localities, regardless of scale, can function as resilient nodes of governance capable of translating grassroots solidarity into meaningful, organized responses. Therefore, our study suggests that democratic renewal in the region may depend less on stable institutional development and more on flexible, adaptive governance structures that are open to integrating irregular, spontaneous civil initiatives. The findings contribute to broader debates on migration governance, democratic resilience, and the evolving role of civil society under pressure.

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