



Academic Activism and Collaborative Governance in Ukraine's Wartime Reality: Case Study within E-comUnity Project

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Abstract.

The article explores the evolving role of academic activism during wartime through an in-depth case study launched within the framework of Jean Monnet “E-comUnity” project in Ukraine. Conducted amid the disruptions of Russia’s full-scale invasion, the project shows how academic initiatives can function as civic infrastructure – supporting democratic resilience, local governance, and digital engagement under extreme conditions. Drawing on participatory methods, stakeholder workshops, and a socio-informatics study of Telegram use among Ukrainian military personnel, volunteers in Ukraine, and the Ukrainian diaspora in Germany, the paper examines how researchers navigate data collection, ethics, and positionality when traditional fieldwork is complicated or no longer viable.

The purpose. Informed by this fieldwork, the article formulates the following research questions: (1) How do academic researchers engaged in collaborative governance projects in wartime Ukraine experience and address the challenges of data generation and analysis? (2) What implications do these challenges have for academic activism and knowledge production under crisis conditions?

It argues that academic labor in crisis settings entails both epistemic and civic commitments: producing knowledge while simultaneously co-creating solutions with affected communities. The findings reveal the potential of collaborative governance models, activists-centered digital spaces, and reflexive methodologies to foster civic empowerment. The outcomes contribute to emerging debates on academic activism by framing scholarship as an infrastructural and collaborative practice essential to democratic resilience in times of war.

Keywords: collaborative governance, public administration, civil society, digital technologies, digital democracy, civic engagement, activism, resilience

Академічний активізм та спільне врядування в реаліях воєнного часу в Україні: кейс у межах проєкту E-comUnity

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Анотація.

Абстрактний. Стаття досліджує еволюцію ролі академічного активізму під час війни на прикладі ґрунтового кейсу, започаткованого в рамках проєкту Жана Моне «E-comUnity» в Україні. Проєкт, що проводиться в умовах зривів повномасштабного вторгнення Росії, показує, як академічні ініціативи можуть функціонувати як громадянська інфраструктура, підтримуючи демократичну стійкість, місцеве врядування та цифрову взаємодію в екстремальних умовах. Спираючись на партисипативні методи, семінари зацікавлених сторін та дослідження соціоінформатики використання Telegram серед українських військових, волонтерів в Україні та української діаспори в Німеччині, у статті розглядається, як дослідники орієнтуються у зборі даних, етиці та позиційності, коли традиційні польові дослідження складні або більше не життєздатні.

Мета. Ґрунтуючись на цьому дослідженні, стаття формулює такі дослідницькі питання: (1) Як академічні дослідники, що займаються спільними проєктами врядування в Україні під час війни, відчують та вирішують проблеми генерації та аналізу даних? (2) Які наслідки ці виклики мають для академічної активності та виробництва знань у кризових умовах?

Стверджується, що академічна праця в кризових умовах передбачає як епістемічні, так і громадянські зобов'язання: виробництво знань і одночасне спільне створення рішень із постраждалими громадами. Отримані результати розкривають потенціал моделей спільного врядування, цифрових просторів, орієнтованих на активістів, та рефлексивних методологій для сприяння розширенню громадянських можливостей. Результати сприяють виникненню дебатів про академічний активізм, представляючи науку як інфраструктурну та спільну практику, необхідну для демократичної стійкості в умовах війни.

Ключові слова: спільне врядування, державне управління, громадянське суспільство, цифрові технології, цифрова демократія, громадянська активність, стійкість

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Introduction.

Relevance. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has profoundly disrupted the country's democratic development, fracturing institutional capacities and threatening hard-won civic freedoms. Yet amid these ruptures, Ukrainian society has exhibited remarkable adaptive capacity. Grassroots mobilization, digital self-organization and networking, both with informal governance mechanisms have flourished across both occupied and liberated territories, suggesting that civil resilience is not only surviving the war, but actively shaping its outcomes.

Emerging research has begun to conceptualize these developments as wartime activism – a distinct form of civic engagement shaped by the urgency and volatility of war (Matveieva et al., 2022; Navumau et al., 2025a). Defined by networked, often improvisational practices across frontline, rear, and diasporic settings, wartime activism encompasses a broad spectrum of civic efforts, including support for military, humanitarian, and governance activities (Khoma, 2022; Channell-Justice, 2023; Matveieva & Navumau, 2023; Navumau et al., 2025b; Wulf et al, forthcoming). Ukrainian youth, historically active in pro-European and democratization movements, have continued to play a crucial role through digital campaigns, election monitoring, and crowdfunding initiatives for the armed forces (Gorokhova et al., 2025). Feminist collectives such as “Feminism YA” exemplify how cultural and gender activism persist as efficient forms of civic resistance and political expression under wartime conditions (Pinich & Beers Fägersten, 2024; Matveieva, 2024). Even in occupied territories, informal local networks serve as both humanitarian lifelines and sites of quiet resistance to authoritarian rule (Glazkova et al., 2025; Wulf and Randall, 2024).

In parallel, scholars of socio-informatics have begun to document how digital infrastructures shape and mediate these new forms of civic participation. Socio-informatics, which examines the mutual shaping of information technologies and social practices, offers a valuable lens for understanding the infrastructural dynamics of wartime activism. Platforms like Telegram, for instance, have emerged as critical tools not only for tactical coordination and information dissemination but also for emotional support and community-building in disrupted settings (Aal et al, 2019; Tuck et al, 2023; Wijemars and Lokot, 2022). These studies reveal how digital technologies function as both enablers and constraints of civic agency under conditions of surveillance, infrastructural breakdown, and psychological trauma (Aal et al, 2019; Grinko et al, 2022; Wulf

et al, 2022). By foregrounding the sociotechnical configurations that support civic life during wartime, socio-informatics contributes essential insights into how citizens navigate trust, visibility, and risk in high-stakes environments.

What remains underexplored, however, is the role of academic actors in this shifting civic landscape. Specifically, there is little empirical insight into how researchers working in - and in solidarity with - Ukraine have adapted their methods, ethics, and epistemic roles in response to war. Socio-informatics-informed academic projects, such as those blending civic engagement with platform studies and co-design practices, provide a promising but still emergent field of inquiry into what academic activism entails under such conditions.

This paper addresses that gap by examining the role of academic activism in wartime Ukraine, drawing on the case of the Jean Monnet E-comUnity project as a collaborative virtual platform without physical space that simultaneously produces knowledge, supports infrastructure of civic actors' cooperation, and advances EU-aligned values under the conditions of Russo-Ukrainian war. Designed to foster civic competence, digital literacy, and collaborative governance in the Dnipropetrovsk region, the E-comUnity project operates as a hybrid initiative: at once an educational intervention built and developed at the Institute of Public Administration at Dnipro University of Technology, a knowledge production platform, and a civic resilience mechanism. Through workshops, participatory modules, and stakeholder engagements, the project engages over 200 youth and community actors over 3 years in co-producing sustainable and inclusive civic solutions.

To explore the epistemic, practical, and ethical dimensions of academic activism under wartime conditions, we focus on one empirical strand (or subproject) within the E-comUnity project: a socio-informatics study on how Telegram functions as a digital infrastructure of coordination, care, and resistance in times of war. Based on interviews with military personnel, volunteers, and the Ukrainian diaspora in Germany, as well as ethnographic fieldnotes from Dnipro city of Ukraine and researcher reflexivity, this sub-project describes how researchers navigate issues of access, trauma, security, and positionality when traditional data collection frameworks are no longer viable after the Russian invasion in Ukraine.

The purpose. Informed by this fieldwork, the article formulates the following research questions: (1) How do academic researchers engaged in collaborative governance projects in wartime Ukraine



experience and address the challenges of data generation and analysis? (2) What implications do these challenges have for academic activism and knowledge production under crisis conditions?

By tracing the methodological adaptations, ethical dilemmas, and civic entanglements of our research practice, we argue that academic collaborative projects like E-comUnity do more than document social resilience – they actively participate in building it and showcases the benefits of such collaborative initiatives. The wartime context has redefined the role of scholarship: from neutral analysis to infrastructural engagement, from method to action, and from observation to co-production. In doing so, this paper offers empirical insights into Ukraine's wartime civic transformation and, at the same time, a reflection on the evolving role of academia in collaborative governance in the face of crisis.

Results.

Positionality. This study emerges from the unique positionality of a research team operating at the intersection of academic inquiry and civic engagement. The co-authors are affiliated with Dnipro University of Technology in Ukraine and the University of Siegen in Germany, reflecting a collaboration between scholars embedded in a war-affected society and those situated in a more stable European academic context. This configuration informs both the methodological approach and the epistemological stance of the project.

Researchers engaged in the Jean Monnet e-Community project occupy a dual role – as both observers of civic transformations and active participants in shaping them. This duality is not incidental but rather constitutive of the project's design, which aims to empower Ukrainian communities through education, digital tools, and collaborative governance frameworks. For those based in Ukraine, particularly in Dnipro city, this involvement extends beyond academic labor to personal investment in community resilience. Teaching, mentoring, organizing training sessions, and building networks with local actors means of data collection in the field and interventions into the social and political fabric of wartime life of the community studied.

One of the core empirical components of the project involved the analysis of interviews with three interrelated groups – military personnel, volunteers, and members of the Ukrainian diaspora. These interviews were conducted to identify key patterns of networking and communication between the groups and to understand the strategic and emotional role of Telegram as a wartime communication platform. This inquiry allowed the team to explore how information is shared, relationships are maintained,

and civic engagement is enhanced across physical and digital frontlines. The experience of gathering, processing, and analyzing data under such volatile conditions presented considerable challenges, including limited access to the field, trauma-sensitive interview contexts, and unstable digital infrastructure. These challenges in their interconnection and complexity shaped the empirical findings but also laid the groundwork for the conceptual framing of the current article.

Such deep participation offered invaluable insights but also raised critical ethical concerns. Conducting research amid war, where interviewees were displaced, traumatized, or under threat, required heightened sensitivity to issues of consent, confidentiality, and emotional wellbeing. The imperative to “do no harm” became especially urgent in the context where the act of participation could expose individuals to surveillance or retribution. Moreover, the shifting power dynamics between local communities and international partners, which has been amplified by inequalities in mobility, funding, and institutional security, demanded continuous reflexivity and a commitment to transparency.

That is why, ethically, the project faced several tensions: between documentation and intervention, between amplifying voices and unintentionally instrumentalizing them, and between the urgency of knowledge production and the need to protect those who share their experiences. In response, the team has adopted flexible, participant-centered methodologies, such as snowball sampling, anonymized interviews, and collaborative interpretation of findings. These approaches aimed not only to mitigate harm but to affirm the agency and knowledge of those most affected by the war.

By foregrounding these positional and ethical complexities, the project reframed academic research as a situated, responsive, and co-constructed practice - one that acknowledges its limitations while striving to be accountable to the communities it seeks to understand and support.

Methods. The methodological approach adopted in this study reflects the deeply connected nature of academic labor and civic engagement under wartime conditions. Rather than observing activism from a distance, the research team was inscribed into the collaborative and transformative processes it sought to study. This shaped the empirical strategies authors employed, and also the ethical and epistemological orientation of the work. As has been mentioned, war did not simply constitute the backdrop to the research – it fundamentally redefined its methods, priorities, and the very meaning of academic inquiry.



The empirical foundation of the article drew on two interrelated strands: 1) the implementation of the Jean Monnet E-comUnity project as an example of academic activism in practice, and 2) a socio-informatics study of how Telegram was used by military personnel, volunteers, and diaspora communities as a digital infrastructure of coordination, care, and resistance (the shorter version of the paper entitled “Telegram as a Lifeline and a Battlefield: A Socio-Informatics Study of Communication and Resistance Among Ukrainians in War” has been accepted as a poster for conference “Communities & Technologies 2025”). Together, these strands formed a meta-case of academic activism – documenting civic resilience with simultaneous participating in its co-production.

Wartime Constraints and Adaptive Research Design.

The implementation of the E-comUnity project took place under the significant constraints imposed as a result of the full-scale Russian invasion. Access to essential open government data was limited, rendering it impossible to accurately determine the number or composition of civil society organizations, as well as numbers of all other target groups. In many cases, relevant data were either not collected or presented in formats incompatible with the research focus. Consequently, the scope, scale, and gender dimensions of existing civic initiatives remained unclear.

These limitations extended to fieldwork. Local government bodies, under pressure from emergency governance duties, were often inaccessible or reluctant to engage in research activities. However, through persistent communication and by emphasizing the civic significance of the E-comUnity – “empowering communities and fostering collaborative governance” – local authorities were eventually persuaded to participate, thus enabling scholarly and activist goals (Garcia et al., 2025) to align.

To mitigate these constraints, the team adopted flexible, participant-(co-)driven strategies. Snowball sampling of interview respondents, digital surveys, and collaboration with volunteer networks became central to data collection. Researchers physically based in the Dnipropetrovsk region (a war-affected area) relied on their personal networks, experience of cooperation through making donations, and local initiatives to sustain project activities. These efforts enabled continued field access and helped to ensure the ethical viability and contextual sensitivity of the work.

Interviews and Digital Ethnography Across Frontlines and Borders.

The second research strand focused specifically

on Telegram as a contested socio-technical infrastructure. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three key groups: military personnel, civic volunteers, and members of the Ukrainian diaspora in Germany. The interviews investigated how Telegram was used for tactical coordination, emotional support, information verification, and the maintenance of transnational civic networks. Participants were recruited through existing social ties and diaspora connections, with interviews conducted in Ukrainian and Russian languages, depending on participant preference and language comfort.

These interviews were complemented by auto-ethnographic fieldwork, in which members of the research team (some of whom are themselves involved in civic or diasporic initiatives) reflected on their own experiences, affective engagement, and positionality. These reflections illuminated dynamics of digital trust, insider-outsider boundaries, and the evolving ethics of communication in wartime. Together, the interviews and ethnographic journaling helped to capture the emotional, infrastructural, and strategic dimensions of civic life under extreme conditions.

Reflexivity and Method as Activism.

Across both strands, the methodology was not only a means of inquiry but also a form of civic intervention. Conducting research in a warzone involved ethical risk-taking, emotional labor, and continuous negotiation of boundaries between scholarship and activism. Team members contributed not just their expertise but their personal resources, time, and networks – actively sustaining both data collection and civic education efforts in a moment of national crisis.

This methodological stance aligns with a broader vision of academic activism in wartime: one in which research and engagement are not separable domains, but mutually constitutive practices. By amplifying local agency, navigating platform politics, and addressing real-time ethical dilemmas, the research is not simply analyze Ukraine’s democratic resilience – it became part of the infrastructure sustaining it.

Limitations. The wartime context of this research presented a range of methodological limitations that shaped both the scope and the execution of the study. Most notably, the crisis conditions in Ukraine significantly affected access to data and continuity of research processes. Frequent disruptions due to shelling, infrastructure damage, and displacement of participants and team members hindered consistent engagement with field sites. In some cases, interviews had to be postponed and conducted remotely under suboptimal conditions.



Furthermore, the lack of reliable statistical and administrative data, such as updated records on civil society organizations or digital literacy indicators, compelled the research team to rely on alternative and often fragmented data sources. This limited the representativeness of the findings and challenged efforts to draw broader generalizations.

The project also encountered considerable ethical challenges, particularly in terms of safeguarding the well-being of participants and researchers. Conducting interviews with individuals affected by war (especially military personnel and displaced persons) required heightened sensitivity to trauma, trust-building, and anonymity. In some cases, concerns over surveillance and security constrained the depth of inquiry or precluded participation altogether.

Finally, the emotional toll on the research team must be acknowledged. Many members were not only investigators but also residents of war-affected areas or active participants in civic initiatives. The resulting emotional fatigue and ethical strain, from navigating blurred boundaries between professional roles and personal commitments, impacted the pace of research and necessitated frequent adjustments in fieldwork plans and division of labor.

Despite these limitations, the project's adaptive, participatory approach allowed meaningful data collection and critical reflection. Nevertheless, the findings should be understood as context-specific, shaped by conditions of urgency, instability, and constrained access that are characteristic of academic work in active crisis zones.

Moreover, the context-specific nature of the study presents inherent limitations to the generalizability of its findings. The research was conducted in the unique and evolving circumstances of wartime Ukraine, with all the socio-political, cultural, and technological specificities that this entails. While the insights gained (particularly around digital civic engagement, collaborative governance, and academic activism) may resonate with other crisis-affected regions, the dynamics observed are deeply rooted in Ukraine's historical, geopolitical, and institutional landscape. As such, extrapolating these findings to other contexts should be done with caution and with careful attention to local conditions and actor configurations.

Key insights.

The key insights of the study emerged along three lines of inquiry. The first one concerned the use of Telegram by military personnel. This use relates to coordination with civilians, given the restricted or entirely prohibited use of Telegram during active service.

Members of the Armed Forces of Ukraine use Telegram with caution due to security risks, such as geolocation leaks or data interception by the enemy. For example, as one interview respondent noted: "A girl posted a photo of a destroyed launcher on Instagram. This helped the Russians confirm the target had been hit" (Navumau & Matveieva, 2025, in press). Incidents like this led the military to prefer secure communication systems. Nonetheless, extensive experience has been accumulated in using Telegram to coordinate with volunteers. Private chats and closed groups often host requests for specific resources, which volunteers swiftly respond to through their networks. This cooperation enables rapid fulfilment of units' needs, bypassing bureaucratic delays. The contribution to the development of collaborative governance in this sphere lies in the creation of a flexible, decentralised supply system, where volunteers act as intermediaries between the military and local communities, while Telegram facilitates the quick coordination of actions. The establishment of a hybrid infrastructure, in which military personnel, despite limited use of the platform, can interact with civilian actors to ensure rapid responses to frontline needs, defines the role of this unmoderated platform as a fast yet insecure bridge between formal (military) and informal (volunteer) structures. This becomes a key element of collaborative governance in wartime conditions.

The second case concerns the use of Telegram by volunteers to organize logistics and coordinate activities. A volunteer respondent noted: "We coordinate everything through Telegram. I can post about a shortage of tourniquets, and within ten minutes I get five offers." However, the lack of formal verification often led to increased distrust, prompting volunteers to form closed circles and conduct "reputation audits" before fulfilling requests (Navumau & Matveieva, 2025, in press). For instance, a volunteer from a charitable foundation created a Telegram channel to coordinate efforts between medics, civilian drivers, and local communities in the Dnipropetrovsk region. Through this channel, volunteers promptly arranged the delivery of medical supplies to frontline zones, using reputation checks to avoid fraud. One such request – to transport medicines to Bakhmut – was fulfilled within 12 hours thanks to rapid information exchange in the chat. This channel became a platform for joint decision-making, where volunteers, drivers, and medics collectively set priorities and allocated resources.

The third case involves the use of Telegram by diaspora activists in the EU to organise transnational coordination and support for the Ukrainian army. A respondent from Germany stated: "A driver from



Bochum delivered our packages to Kyiv. We found him in a Telegram group for displaced persons. It was faster than using any company” (Navumau & Matveieva, 2025, in press). At the same time, the diaspora often experienced tension, feeling accused of “moral desertion” by those who remained in Ukraine. A campaign of “demonising refugees,” fueled by large-scale Kremlin propaganda, deepened the divide between those who had left and those who stayed. Still, the desire to bridge this gap and affirm one’s civic stance and belonging was frequently cited by respondents as a key motivator for activism. In this context, Telegram functioned as a transnational unifying platform, enabling bridges to be built between diaspora members and Ukrainian communities for directing resources from European societies to Ukraine. It also contributed to the creation of a hybrid infrastructure, whereby the diaspora began to secure its position and voice in host countries and gradually assumed the role of cultural and logistical intermediary – strengthening collaborative governance through cross-border exchanges of knowledge and resources.

The findings of this study reveal the value of collaborative governance as a viable and empowering model in times of crisis where motivated decentralized efforts allow to ensure greater results and resilience effects. When traditional institutional channels are weakened or disrupted, as in wartime Ukraine, collaborative governance enables flexible, participatory decision-making that draws on the strengths of both formal structures and informal civic networks. Crucially, this model thrives when it incorporates activists’ knowledge and civic expertise – the lived experiences, situational awareness, and grassroots capacities of local actors who are already engaged in solving problems on the ground. Such hybrid forms of governance as emergency responses can serve also as building blocks for longer-term democratic resilience.

Another key insight concerns the central role of digital spaces as arenas for youth engagement and activist visibility. Platforms like Telegram have facilitated communication, coordination, and emotional support during the war, and they have also become critical infrastructures of civic expression and political agency. In contexts where physical public space is constrained by violence or displacement, digital platforms enable marginalized voices, particularly those of LGBTIQ+ civic activists, to be heard, seen, and connected. These digital arenas must be recognized and supported as essential components of civic life, especially under conditions of disruption and growing threat of authoritarianism.

Recommendations for policymakers. Based

on the findings of this study, we propose the following recommendations to strengthen democratic resilience and civic engagement during wartime crisis and recovery:

1) Invest in collaborative governance platforms that integrate grassroots actors, including diaspora members. Local authorities should prioritize the development of collaborative structures that bring together public officials, civic organizations, volunteers, and academicians. These platforms enhance responsiveness, legitimacy, and trust by valuing diverse forms of knowledge and expertise, particularly those emerging from within affected communities.

2) Facilitate digital infrastructures for youth-led civic participation. Municipal and national stakeholders should support the creation and maintenance of secure, accessible, and youth-friendly digital spaces. These platforms enable meaningful civic engagement, unmuting and empowering marginalized voices through sensitive and empowering moderation, and provide critical avenues for participation when traditional public spheres are disrupted or reveal areas which could benefit from such a synergy.

3) Recognize and support activist initiatives as vital contributors to social resilience. Activist networks and grassroots initiatives often fill gaps in governance, service delivery, and public communication. Their contributions should not only be tolerated but actively supported (through funding, protection, and partnership) as integral components of democratic society, especially in crises.

These recommendations call for a shift in perspective of wartime mode of governance: from seeing civic actors as auxiliary to governance to recognizing them as co-producers of resilience, innovation, and accountability in times of uncertainty.

Conclusions.

This article has examined the Jean Monnet E-coMUnity project as both a case study and a meta-case of academic activism in wartime Ukraine. Through a combination of civic education, empirical inquiry, and digital engagement, the project demonstrated how academic initiatives can meaningfully contribute to local resilience, democratic innovation, and civic empowerment under conditions of extreme crisis. By actively involving youth, local authorities, volunteers, and members of the diaspora, the project fostered new forms of collaborative governance and reaffirmed the central role of academic work in supporting democratic values.

Our findings highlight the necessity of flexible, ethical, and inclusive methodologies that are attuned to the instability, urgency, and emotional inten-



sity of wartime settings. Rather than retreating from research in moments of disruption, scholars can engage more deeply – so long as their methods prioritize care, safety, and reflexivity. The E-comUnity project, along with the associated socio-informatics study on Telegram, illustrates how research can function not only as observation but as civic infrastructure: enabling connection, visibility, and coordination across frontlines and borders.

Finally, this work calls for greater institutional recognition and support for academic-activist collaborations within EU and national policy frameworks. Projects like E-comUnity exemplify how academic resources (when mobilized responsively and inclusively) can bridge the gap between knowledge

production and civic transformation. As Europe faces ongoing and future crises related to the pressure of authoritarian regimes such as those established in Russian Federation and Belarus, strengthening these intersections between research, education, and activism will be vital to building democratic resilience from the ground up.

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