Situational Analysis Case Study

Odesa region

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Abbreviations

CSO	Civil society organisation
FGD	Focus group discussion
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

in Bolhrad, Odesa oblast, Ukraine © Bolhrad District State Administration

1. Introduction

Five years on after the conflict in the east and the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine continues to face a number of geopolitical and domestic challenges. Against this backdrop, concerns for Ukraine's integrity feature highly in the national discourse and are echoed by some international observers.

This case study presents a conflict analysis of three *hromadas* (districts)[1] in the south of Odesa oblast: Bolgrad, Reni and Rozdolnoye.

The region was chosen for the following reasons: highest number of ethnic minorities in the country; strong links with kin states of multiple ethnic minorities; geographical remoteness from Kyiv; agricultural economy; and a long history of patriarchal traditions.

This case study forms part of an analysis of three regions in Ukraine: Kherson, Odesa and Zakarpattia. The common findings from each region are summarised in a synthesis report, which also proposes peacebuilding recommendations.

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1   *Hromada* is a Ukrainian term for a 'territorial commune'. Although currently not formal administrative units, *hromadas* have certain self-governance responsibilities and are at the heart of decentralisation reform. See: Poroshenko suggests granting status of regions to Crimea, Kyiv, Sevastopol, creating new political subdivision of 'community', Interfax Ukraine, 26 June 2014, https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/211043.html.

2. Methodology

In October and November 2018, a series of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out in three *hromadas* of the Odesa oblast (part of it is also known as Bessarabia): Bolgrad, Reni and Rozdolnoye. The qualitative study draws on views and experiences of 48 respondents, of which 21 people (13 men and 8 women) were interviewed individually and 27 (18 women and 9 men) participated in FGDs. Depending on the respondents' preferences, interviews were conducted in Ukrainian or Russian.

The respondents were sampled from a wide range of professional and social backgrounds, and included: local government officials, representatives of education services, representatives of local police, businesspeople, journalists, civic activists and religious leaders. They identified with diverse (majority and minority) ethnic and religious groups present in the region and represented different age categories (25–60 years).

Given the sensitivity of the research topic and the pre-election political environment, all participants have been anonymised.

Based on a relational (referring to the social construction of masculinities and femininities) and intersectional (as systems of power shaped by other identities)[2] approach, the methodology included questions on gender dynamics to ensure gender was mainstreamed through the research. This allowed for the most prominent gender issues to be highlighted. However, a more focused methodology is required to uncover deep-rooted gendered drivers and effects and find ways to help overcome a lack of interest in gender issues among local stakeholders (a fact brought to light during this project).

The study also included desk research and a review of literature, including media reports (including social media); and documents of national and local authorities and statistical bodies.

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2   H. Myrttinen, N. Popovic and L. Khattab, 'Measuring gender' in peacebuilding: Evaluating peacebuilding efforts from a gender-relational perspective, London: International Alert, 2016, https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Gender_MeasuringGenderPeacebuilding_EN_2016.pdf; S. Tielemans, Gender & conflict analysis toolkit for peacebuilders, London: Conciliation Resources, 2015, https://www.c-r.org/downloads/CR%20Gender%20Toolkit%20WEB.pdf

3. Context Analysis

Communities in the south of Odesa oblast are characterised by their multiculturalism, which was noted both by experts and participants in the FGDs. Each national minority stresses the need for an individual approach to its linguistic and cultural needs. However, the large number of interethnic marriages between Bulgarians, Gagauz, Moldovans, Romanians and Ukrainians is a significant deterrent to potential intergroup conflict escalation, and people in the studied *hromadas* generally identify themselves as citizens of Ukraine.

Mutually beneficial interactions breed a sense of multiculturalism and social cohesion (particularly in Bolgrad).

> *"We still have such relations when a neighbour will plaster the wall for you for free and then you will return the favour. Mutual help is the normal thing here – this is called 'meji' in the local language. Traditionally, when, for example, Albanians, Gagauz, Bulgarians built their houses, the whole village built the house for each* [family] *in turn. It brings people together."*[3]

To resolve conflicts in the oblast, a multilevel system of social cohesion has been created, consisting of a relatively elastic structure of social interconnections. The key components of this system are kinship, mixed marriages, similar types of business, interdependence and history itself. For several centuries, the local population has been forced to build a system of interdependence to meet external threats. Cultural organisations, such as those that organise festivals and events, are key to maintaining these ties at the community level, as they involve representatives of different groups and ensure that traditions intertwine.

> *"They meet, communicate with their families and with several families, with neighbours and friends … Families come out to enjoy the outdoors or have a rest, what they can afford. I am living in a very friendly street and often we have joint dinners and holidays. Traditionally, we celebrate 6 May, St George's Day. There is the sacrifice of a lamb, so all the neighbours and residents of the street come to a joint dinner. We can also celebrate the New Year outside and just make shish kebabs, cook yushka."*[4,5]

Due to climate and geographical conditions, livelihoods and the regional economy in the south of Odesa oblast have a distinctly agrarian nature. The values of landownership and the possibility to work the land oneself play the strongest role in feelings of integration.

Distance from the regional centre (up to 300km) and proximity (such as of Rozdolnoye) to the unrecognised Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (the distance between Rozdolnoye and Tiraspol is 55km) affects perceptions of security. Examples are the community vulnerability to Russian Federation-sponsored propaganda[6] and the presence of regular Russian military units in Transdnistria.[7] Geographical remoteness from the oblast centre (Odesa)[8] and cultural ties with other states (with which citizens may have ethnic or other social links) create the need to maintain a balance between the agendas of these states and that of Ukraine itself. However, factors such

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3   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, Bolgrad, November 2018
4   *Yushka* is a traditional Ukrainian soup dish.
5   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
6   For example, Russian, as well as neighbouring countries', television channels and other media outlets are easily available in the local communities, while communication from the Ukrainian government is lackinga negative influence .
7   In 2014 and early 2015, when the conflict in Eastern Ukraine began, there were discussions of scenarios in which Russian military forces would connect across the territory of Ukraine (between units based in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and those based in Transdnistria, thus extending the line of confrontation). These discussions contributed to feelings of insecurity, as demonstrated by the concerns voiced in FGDs conducted during the 'Ukrainian Peacebuilding School' project in November 2014. Perceptions over these threats will vary over time, however, the presence of Russian military forces in the region continues and will continue to cast a shadow.
8   By 'Odesa' we mean the city of Odesa, the administrative centre of Odesa oblast. 'Odesa oblast' is identified by the word 'oblast'.

as the imperfect knowledge of indigenous languages among national minorities (particularly those aged 20 and below), geographical distance and the lack of a land border hinder the influence of these states.

Due to affiliation with the Russian Empire and later the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), as well as the relatively neutral policy pursued by the Empire in relation to these territories (including the role of Russia in the Russian-Turkish wars of the 17th–19th centuries), communities' historical memory portrays Russia in a neutral or positive light. The USSR pioneered the assimilation policy, something that was acknowledged by the respondents.

> *"The Soviet Union laid the foundations for this assimilation, the fruits of which have appeared now. When I was in kindergarten, we knew Albanian, Gagauz and Bulgarian, but did not know Russian because our parents did not speak Russian to us."*[9]

> *"Grandmothers do not speak with grandchildren in their indigenous languages – Bulgarian or Albanian – but mainly in Russian. They spoke their indigenous languages with me in my childhood, however."*[10]

That said, the legacy of frequent changes of power in the 19th–20th centuries in this historical memory creates a certain distrust towards any type of authority.

In 2015, in response to the deaths among military personnel mobilised from Bolgrad to the Armed Forces of Ukraine fighting in the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) zone of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, the perception of Russia as an aggressor was not clearly articulated.[11] At the same time, however, with the military escalation (events surrounding the defence of Donetsk airport), the perception of Russia as an aggressor started to change slightly.

Over the past 20 years, there have been changes in communities' way of life, particularly for representatives of all national minorities – Bulgarians, Gagauz, Moldovans, Romanians, Albanians and Ukrainians (Ukrainians are a minority in certain towns of Bolgrad). Labour and education migration play a significant role in these changes. Many people from national minorities leave to work or study at universities abroad, where cultures might be closer to their ethnic background.

> *"Previously, there was more internal migration – people moved to Izmail, Odesa, Mykolayiv, Kyiv. Now they are trying to go only abroad. Moldovans mostly move to Italy from here, as Italian is easier to learn; the Gagauz people go to Turkey; and many go to Russia."*[12]

Migration, both internal and external, combined with decreasing birth rates, reduces the number of young people, as well as the general population. Opportunities to study at educational institutions in other countries, such as those initiated by the governments of Bulgaria and Romania, according to respondents, compete strongly with programmes offered by Ukrainian universities.

Respondents also noted a decrease in civic activism among young people. That said, some communities are demonstrating different ways to make young people more active. For example, in Rozdolnoye a system of integrated support for children and young people has been established, aimed at developing skills and employment opportunities. This does not solve the problem of migration, but it reduces the traditional risks that propel young people towards migration in the first place.

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9   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
10   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
11   As recorded by researchers during FGDs and roundtables that took place between November 2014 and February 2015.
12   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018

The lack of growth opportunities and spaces for young professionals to develop their potential is a key influencer of migration. If higher education is fuelling migration to the cities of Ukraine (mostly Odesa and Kyiv) or to the cities of other states, then the lack of conditions and space for graduates to flourish means they might not (and frequently do not) return. This hinders community development and furthers depopulation.

"To be honest, children learn Bulgarian not to know their indigenous language and traditions, but because in Bulgaria they will obtain government education grants, which, unfortunately, is almost impossible in Ukraine! Naturally, most of the children who are leaving to study then try to find work there and do not return. Here it turns out that it's not about the preservation of traditions, but about the pragmatism of our life today. Bulgaria is interested in the influx of young people and every year gives our children more and more quotas for education. This gives children the opportunity to then move to other developed countries."[13]

Some respondents pointed out the negative impact of labour migration on the balance between work and personal life. It is also said to affect gender roles, even in traditionally conservative families of national minorities. For example, a respondent noted changes in Gagauz families, where a woman, leaving to work in Turkey, becomes the family breadwinner, thereby changing the nature of the family relationship.

"Women take control of the family into their own hands, not like before, when the husband was the boss in the house. Sometimes a woman earns more and maintains the whole family."[14]

Civic activism in the communities is low, so civil society is represented more by separate active individuals than by civil society organisations (CSOs) advocating for community interests (with the exception of cultural communities which often compete with each other for the opportunity to be a communications link for interested foreign countries). According to some respondents, due to the low level of activism, the credibility of CSOs is low as a result. Exceptions include the individual initiatives of citizens aimed at solving immediate local problems (for example, businesspeople and residents of some streets who get together and cooperate to repair a road).

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13   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
14   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018

4. Key Conflict Triggers and Actors

4.1 Causes of conflict and (in)stability – security, political, economic, social and behavioural factors

In the FGDs and in-depth interviews, respondents noted the absence of conflict in relations between different national minorities. The main driver of interethnic conflict would seem to be tensions occurring through daily interactions (e.g. division of land, young people getting into fights at discos, etc.). These can make villages mobilise, however, most end with the joint tradition of drinking wine as a method and signifier of reconciliation.

"In local elections, conflicts may arise over the candidates, but even then it's small … Public protest is expressed by the fact that people simply don't take part in elections."[15]

The culture of wine consumption in these communities is a uniting factor, regardless of ethnic background. That said, some respondents note a certain superficiality of such an interaction, and the fact that minority representatives are more willing to help members of their own minority than others.

However, the researchers did discern a number of causes of conflict and instability – whether current or potential – from discussions with respondents. These are summarised below.

The agrarian economy determines the ownership of land plots and the ability to dispose of them as a core value. As a result, any attempt to deprive representatives of southern communities of land is perceived as a threat to personal wellbeing and livelihood.

This is typical of all *hromadas* studied. Conflict potential exists due to the fact that the regulatory framework for land disposition has changed since independence, that there is a need for the correct formulation of title documents for land plots, and that there is a lack of standards for dividing land plots, which leads to opaque processes for delimitation. The successful resolution of these tensions is dependent on more intensive efforts to make changes to the legal framework and dialogue with community representatives – the owners of land plots.

Local populations' tolerance of informal, semi-legal or even illegal methods (for example, forged paperwork and arbitrary granting of land titles by local authorities) to solve conflicts and problems can intensify this type of conflict. This is typical both for representatives of farms and individuals. In Reni, confrontation has resulted in armed brawls between farmers, whereas in Bolgrad the institutionalised form of conflict resolution is litigation.

"The main conflict is the division of land. There are no conflicts on national or religious grounds. Social issues are gradually resolved. Conflicts are initiated by agricultural enterprises that want to lease land …. They divide people among themselves, organise protests and visits to the hromada administration [to defend the businesses' interests]. *In villages, people have decided who is ready to join whom. In the case of a weaker company, they want to take their shareholders. It goes bankrupt, but does not want to lose shareholders, so more protests. In addition, people don't have title documents fully executed."*[16]

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15   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
16   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018

Decentralisation reform and community amalgamation, and a lack of clarity around these processes, have resulted in tensions between communities.

Due to the lack of effective communication during the initial stages of the decentralisation reform (at the end of 2014 and the first half of 2015), the process proved extremely controversial among communities. At the heart of the problem was the lack of communication and clarity on the reform concept. For example, when representatives of relevant ministries, consulting experts and specialised centres presented their vision and position, they had not taken into account local specifics and had barely done any consultations (and so lacked feedback). Certain anxiety and a fear of the unknown are still present among the communities that have not yet been through the process.

"I think that these fears are more due to uncertainty, since this has not happened in practice yet. The unknown is that we do not know what will come tomorrow, there is no clear source of income … The lands outside the village were subordinate to the village council. In one day, the oblast administration took these functions for itself! Nobody knows what will come into their heads tomorrow! Nothing has been adjusted yet, there is no clear mechanism for how this territorial community will function."[17]

The education sector has also been affected, with respondents reporting an unofficial struggle between schools for pupils and for teachers out of fear that they will be forced to close if they do not have enough staff or students, and the school will be moved to a bigger school within a new amalgamated community. However, lately there has been progress with reform implementation and attitudes towards decentralisation reform have improved.

"Over the past 3–4 years, a change has been observed. It used to be just negative."[18]

There are cases in which communities themselves volunteered and advocated for amalgamation.

Experts noted a new trend, in that a change in the perception of outcomes of donor assistance has the potential to gradually bring improvements to communities, but is also becoming a growing conflict trigger.

"Representatives of communities have begun to trust more European organisations that come to the hromada to participate in grant projects. They change a lot. [They bring] *infrastructure, development, a sense of dynamism in the community.* [However, a lack of conflict-sensitive approaches and clear communication means that] *rejected applicants are offended when some villages are not selected. They willingly participate in training, especially those communities that want to merge* [amalgamate with other villages]. *The worldview of community leaders has changed, as well as social facilities, and transformations in populated areas are noticeable."*[19]

Rumours as a source of information can trigger community conflict.

Reliance on rumour as a source of information is exacerbated by the lack of permanent television and radio broadcast signals from Ukrainian channels and stations in the south of Odesa region, which has been the case since Ukraine's independence. For over 20 years, the local population has tuned into telecommunications of other countries. In addition, the area's relative remoteness from the regional centre complicates communications on reforms and can allow individual political leaders and groups to exploit this to preserve electoral influence.

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17   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
18   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
19   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018

For example, the manipulation of Gagauz and Bulgarians by external players initiated and escalated interethnic conflict in 2015–2017.

> *"These were chronological, artificially created situations designed to spark tension between the Gagauz and the state of Ukraine, and then the Bulgarians. Primarily, separatist clichés* [of ethnic minorities' disloyalty to the state] *were used."*[20]

This was due to low levels of resilience to unreliable information and rumours circulating as part of an information campaign associated with the creation of the so-called 'Bessarabian People's Republic' in 2015. During this time there were provocations against Bulgarians and the desecration of monuments. In 2014–2015, representatives of Moldovan law enforcement agencies noted the intensification of recruitment activities in Gagauzia on the territory of Moldova for mercenaries by parties related to the so-called 'Donetsk People's Republic' (DPR) and 'Luhansk People's Republic' (LPR).

> *"Those who cannot afford to pay for the internet or a satellite dish, or buy newspapers, or watch Ukrainian television, exchange their received information with grannies on the 'bench'. Rumours are very widespread."*[21]

On the other hand, some participants recognised the importance of critical thinking and verification of information sources. In addition, they noted a desire to get information from more than one source.

> *"I have my own trusted sources. For example, I watch all the channels, but just to monitor the events. I watch several channels that are more or less trustful. I analyse everything, I try."*[22]

4.2 The main actors involved (local, regional, national and international) – impact, goals, needs and concerns

In the communities studied, perceptions of power are not just assessed by which national identity group a person belongs to, but also by the level of *settledness*, the length of residency in a community, professional authority, as well as positive experiences in management and conflict resolution.

> *"If a newcomer appears in the local government, then he is a stranger for a very long time, maybe even for 10 years. When he has a family and housing here, he becomes one of us. And now they are appointing non-Reni people as the heads of administration – and this is very acutely perceived! The population first of all perceives this as disrespect."*[23]

Authority and legitimacy of **mediators** come from both professional status and personal attributes. Individuals within the community who have social and/or professional status and are acceptable to both sides are turned to resolve conflicts as a first resort, but respondents also cited the use of "gangsters" and recourse to legal process as alternative avenues used. Consistent throughout responses is the importance of the use of symbolic cultural activities, such as the drinking of wine or eating together, as a method to overcome differences.

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20   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
21   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
22   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
23   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018

"Success in professional terms, first of all, or in social activities, is the importance of this person to others. The opinion of an authoritative person is recognised by two parties to the conflict. He can talk and negotiate with people, he speaks on an equal footing. Usually such a person is found and involved from among us. If suddenly there is no such person, then the conflicting parties will have to agree among themselves. Sometimes they even resort to the help of local gangsters. It all depends on the level of the conflict, because not every person will turn to the bandits. Of course, they also apply to the courts. Although the credibility of the legal mechanism is minimal! What else...? A joint meal, they say that it brings people closer together ... this practice is also present at different levels. To remove tension in the villages during holidays, conflicting people can be brought to the table, this is how the first stage of reconciliation will be, but, actually, time heals and after a while the situation calms down."[24]

Local government institutions enjoy a greater degree of respect than regional or national government. The *hromada* government is perceived as being relatively neutral, while central authorities are viewed rather negatively, as they are identified with a rise in prices and the subsequent decline in living standards.

"Relations with power [holders] *are better if something is being built, objects are maintained. Due to the fact that the government has done some work and allocated money for communities, its authority is above average. There are localities − Kubey, Holitsa−2 − where there are conflicts with the authorities, where measures are antagonising people."*[25]

However, local officials were criticised for a perceived lack of ability to work effectively with international organisations and their projects, resulting in a tendency of international organisations to work directly with CSOs.

In each community there are **leaders of public opinion** (heads of enterprises, heads of local cells of parties, deputies of village councils or city council) on whom a great deal depends. These leaders can either aggravate conflicts or mitigate them.

"The head of the village council is of great importance, a lot depends on their ability to resolve or get out of the conflict. Someone ... smart enough to get out of the conflict amicably. And you need to sit down with someone and drink wine to solve the problem."[26]

"From the very beginning, the educational law [Ukrainian language at schools] *was a concern. Gagauz people took it rather hard. But later, after explanations by the education department, everyone understood that additional* [Gagauz-language] *courses would still exist. Education is mandatory in the Ukrainian language, since later on one must go to the university, be competitive. The situation calmed down. Schooling will be in Ukrainian, but there will be additional classes* [of Gagauz language] *in primary and other schools. There are no dangers ... the tension has died down."*[27]

Experts in Reni and Rozdolnoye cite the importance of **youth groups**, yet the nature of these groups differs between *hromadas*. In Rozdolnoye, the activities of these groups are mainly focused on sports and educational activities. In Reni, up to 500 Protestant youth initiate social projects aimed at improving social cohesion by changing community behaviours.

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24   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
25   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
26   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018
27   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018

Spaso-Preobrazhens'kiy Church in Bolhrad, in Odesa, Ukraine © Bolhrad District State Administration

Individual activists who offer solutions to practical problems also enjoy prestige. Business entrepreneurs are mainly distinguished as an active minority that motivates community members to solve problems (through social media, meetings, discussions and direct actions).

Respondents generally hold negative attitudes towards **paramilitary organisations**. Such groups do not exist in the region as they do in other places, such as in Kherson. Part of the reason might be that the social capital of such groups – often associated with Ukrainian ultranationalism – may be lower in Odesa's Russophone society. Many respondents emphasised that "we would not allow them here".

Security services are understaffed and the lack of law enforcement personnel adversely affects feelings of security. *Hromada* inspectors cannot perform their duties properly and **citizens' ('vigilante') groups**, initiated by the *Hromada's* residents, have been necessary to protect public order. On the one hand, this is a demonstration of the mobilisation capacity of community residents. On the other, it undermines the state's monopoly on using coercive tools, which always entails risk.

"No one wants to go and work in the police, because the salary is miserable, and everyone – both the people and the authorities – demand from you! In 1992, there were 120 police. In each village there was a district police officer and his assistant. In the city, 2–3 patrols were on foot. Now in the rayon there are 40 personnel and you cannot force anyone to work … There is a trend in the villages that looting begins in the autumn/ winter period. So at the session they decided that the community itself would create night patrols, people themselves would go out with hunting rifles. However, they do not have the right to do this."[28]

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28   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018

Regional competitions of the Odessa Oblast Mini-Football Championship, town of Bolhrad, in Odesa oblast, Ukraine © Bolhrad District State Administration

5. Sources of Stability and Recommendations for Conflict Resolution and Prevention

The *rayons* covered in this study display a number of sources of stability and indications of positive change, which should be understood and supported by those working towards conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the area. Paramount among these is a robust network of social interconnections between the region's diverse ethnic identity groups, made and reinforced through intermarriage, joint business activity and shared cultural activities.

The area's "small town nature"[29] also helps combat efforts to exacerbate conflict. In a context where everyone has known everyone for a long time, understands the alleged motives of opponents, and retains memory of past activities and personal histories, it is easier for citizens to see through 'propaganda' or positioning and understand who or what is behind the organisation of protest rallies and what their real motivation is.

Territorial and ethnic groups are also starting to use tourism as a tool for regional development. Thus, the level of openness and readiness to accept outsiders at the community level is increasing. The key products around which local tourism develops are cheese and wine production and festivals – existing local traditions. This reduces the level of community isolation and creates opportunities for interaction.

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29   Interviewee, interview by a local researcher, south of Odesa, November 2018

However, the abovementioned positive factors do not eliminate conflict risks completely. There are a number of recommendations for strengthening stability factors and reducing conflict potential emerging from this study, which are summarised below.

- **As landownership is a key source of income and remains an important factor in people valuing stability over unknown results of a conflict**, eliminate miscommunication on land-related issues. There should be sustainable communications between local authorities (district state administration, regional state administration, central-level authorities) on the legal regulation of property rights and protection from raiding.

- **Ethnicity should be consistently understood and incorporated into planning and implementation of decentralisation reform, and reforms need to be communicated clearly and community feedback sought.**
  - Launch and develop a comprehensive dialogue process between local and regional elites, and state authorities. Both formal and informal leaders of the national minorities should be participants of this dialogue to make it sustainable.
  - When considering outreach planning, include communication materials explaining best practices of amalgamated communities, and the advantages and achievements of amalgamation in other districts.
  - Establish regular exchange of information at the grassroots level between the leaders of successfully amalgamated communities (e.g. from the north of Odesa oblast) and those communities that are discussing the modalities of amalgamation. Incorporate social cohesion practices (joint Gagauz, Bulgarian and Moldovan festivals of wine, cultural events, sports competitions) into dialogue to accompany and facilitate decentralisation reform.

- **Make conflict-sensitive investments that provide the necessary jobs and services, while also strengthening community cohesion.** This should include supporting nascent local efforts to boost tourism, and strengthening the infrastructure required to help this and other sectors to flourish. Investment is also needed in social spaces and cultural facilities that provide space for communities to come together and interact, and support creative industries.

- **Support local government officials to effectively interact with and navigate the demands and complexities of international organisations.** International organisations working in the area need to understand that local officials may lack understanding and capacity necessary to interact with and manage the demands of international organisations and aid programmes effectively. Training and mentoring can help to address this, as can creating connections to local government representatives in other parts of Ukraine who have developed more experience in this field.

- **Support local think tanks or civil society to monitor developments in conflict potential** continuously, provide early warning indications, and deliver relevant recommendations on conflict prevention and management to decision-makers regionally and centrally.