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February 2026

Reconstructing Trust: Social Cohesion and Recovery in Wartorn Irpin, Ukraine

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Executive Summary

The recovery of Irpin, a Kyiv suburb devastated during the first stages of Russia's 2022 invasion, offers an early picture of how reconstruction shapes Ukraine's social fabric. Three years after liberation, around 80 percent of housing has been restored, and the rebuilding of critical and social infrastructure is close to completion. However, reconstruction is not merely technical: it redistributes power and trust. This report, based on a face-to-face survey of 610 residents and 14 qualitative interviews with reconstruction experts and Irpin residents, examines how fairness, transparency and participation in Irpin's recovery affect social cohesion: trust among citizens (horizontal) and between citizens and institutions (vertical).

Findings from Irpin challenge assumptions drawn from post-civil war contexts. Reconstruction has not deepened divides between social groups: internally displaced persons (IDPs), veterans and civilians do not perceive one another as competitors for aid or resources. Instead, tensions and mistrust run vertically – between residents and elites. A striking 81 percent of respondents name local authorities as the main undue beneficiaries of reconstruction, and 52 percent express distrust in their ability to manage funds responsibly. In Irpin, then, perceived unfairness undermines institutional credibility rather than social solidarity.

Transparency mechanisms have failed to restore credibility. Ukraine has invested heavily in transparency platforms and digital oversight tools – including DREAM, a national registry for reconstruction projects; Prozorro, an open procurement platform; and the Big Recovery Portal, an EU-supported tracker of recovery initiatives. Yet these systems remain largely unused: 82 percent of Irpin residents report never consulting them. Instead, over half say that visible and verifiable outcomes, regular publication of progress and independent audits would strengthen trust in reconstruction. In short, vertical cohesion depends less on the volume of open data than on the public proof that reconstruction delivers fairly.

Horizontal cohesion, by contrast, remains robust. Nearly half of residents (48 percent) report frequent mutual assistance in the last year, one in four joined volunteer reconstruction efforts, and almost half view Irpin as more united today than before the invasion. Shared labor and self-organized repair have reinforced community bonds and the perception of agency. Reconstruction, despite its flaws, has had a mildly integrative social effect.

Irpin's experience offers three important lessons for policymakers, donors and researchers working on Ukrainian reconstruction:

- **Prioritize accountability over portal proliferation.** Trust follows verified results. Fund independent audits, publicize outcomes and communicate them through channels residents use daily.
- **Scale what sustains cohesion.** Support neighborhood initiatives and small NGOs that embody local agency, the backbone of horizontal trust.
- **Avoid civil-war templates.** Ukraine's external war and civic mobilization make direct analogies misleading. Anchor interventions in local evidence, not imported models.

Introduction

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, one of its immediate objectives was the capture of Kyiv. As Russian forces advanced toward the capital, heavy fighting unfolded in its northern suburbs, including the city of Irpin. By late March, Ukrainian troops had pushed Russian forces back, but at enormous cost: up to 75 percent of Irpin's infrastructure was destroyed or severely damaged.¹

Three years later, reconstruction in Irpin is well underway. Ruins still punctuate parts of the city, but cranes, construction sites and restored buildings now dominate its skyline. The Ukrainian government, local authorities and international donors have invested heavily in rebuilding homes, schools and public infrastructure.² Yet, as comparative research on post-war reconstruction shows, large inflows of resources seldom arrive without friction. Reconstruction is not only a technical endeavor, but also a political process in which different groups compete over scarce resources and for the priority to rebuild their lives first.

This distributive competition can have profound social consequences. Studies from other war and crisis contexts show that inequalities in reconstruction, whether real or perceived, can breed resentment, corrode trust and weaken social cohesion.³ These dynamics are particularly consequential when unequal access to recovery follows visible social boundaries, such as those between ethnic groups, internally displaced persons (IDPs), veterans, and local civilians.⁴

In Ukraine, concerns about equitable reconstruction are becoming increasingly salient. While the national debate on recovery is vibrant, it largely concentrates on macro-level issues such as governance, financing and anti-corruption mechanisms. Much less attention has been paid to how reconstruction impacts social cohesion at the local level – in particular, how residents of war-damaged communities perceive fairness, accountability and participation in reconstruction processes. Existing surveys⁵ capture general attitudes toward recovery across the country, but they tell us little about how these dynamics play out within specific communities. This report, therefore, asks: How does reconstruction affect social cohesion in Irpin?

To answer this question, the report provides the first localized assessment of how reconstruction shapes social cohesion in a single town in Ukraine. It focuses on Irpin, one of the cities most devastated during the battle for Kyiv and among the earliest to receive substantial national and international support. The analysis draws on an original face-to-face survey of 610 Irpin residents conducted in cooperation with the Razumkov Centre, a Ukrainian sociological research institute, in July 2025. It is complemented by 14 qualitative interviews with residents, volunteers and reconstruction experts. Together, these data underpin three central arguments presented in this report.

First, contrary to what much conflict research might suggest, reconstruction in Irpin has not generated new social divisions between population groups differently affected by the war. This means that the patterns of distributive, inter-group conflict documented in many civil war settings cannot be transferred one-to-one to the Ukrainian context, which is characterized by an external aggressor and strong civic mobilization.

Second, the real line of tension in Irpin runs vertically, between citizens and elites, reflecting limited institutional trust and widespread concerns about corruption.

¹ REACH Initiative and UN OCHA, "Ukraine: Residential Building Damage Assessment – Irpin, Kyivska Oblast, February–March 2022," ReliefWeb, September 23, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/residential-building-damage-assessment-irpin-kyivska-oblast-february-march-2022> (accessed October 8, 2025).

² PRAGMATIKA.MEDIA, "The City That Doesn't Stop: Three Years of Irpin's Restoration," March 2025, <https://pragmatika.media/en/misto-shcho-ne-zupnyaietsia-try-roky-vidnovlennia-irpenia/> (accessed October 8, 2025).

³ See, among others: Nchongayi Christantus Begealawuh, "Missed or misused opportunity? Social cohesion, national dialogue and peacebuilding in Cameroon." *African Security Review*, 33 (2024): 497 - 513. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2024.2385373>; Charlotte Fiedler, "What Do We Know about How Armed Conflict Affects Social Cohesion? A Review of the Empirical Literature." *International Studies Review*, 25, no. 3 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad030>; Alexander de Juan, Jan H Pierskalla and E. Schwarz, "Natural Disasters, Aid Distribution, and Social Conflict – Micro-level Evidence from the 2015 Earthquake in Nepal." *World Development*, 126 (2020): 104715. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104715>.

⁴ Oyeindiepreye Solomon and J. Cocodia, "Horizontal Inequality and West Africa's Worsening Security: Case Studies of Mali and Nigeria." *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.9734/jesbs/2023/v36i51220>; Arnim Langer, Frances Stewart, and Rajesh Venugopal, "Horizontal Inequalities and Post-Conflict Development: Laying the Foundations for Durable Peace," in *Horizontal Inequalities and Post-Conflict Development*, ed. Arnim Langer, Frances Stewart, and Rajesh Venugopal (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9780230348622>.

⁵ E.g., Transparency International Ukraine, "Ukrainians See Reconstruction, but Fear Corruption in It: Results of a Sociological Survey," Transparency International Ukraine, August 18, 2025, <https://ti-ukraine.org/en/news/ukrainians-see-reconstruction-but-fear-corruption-in-it-results-of-a-sociological-survey/>; Transatlantic Dialogue Center, "Survey Officially Published: Reconstruction of Ukraine and International Aid," Transatlantic Dialogue Center, December 13, 2022, <https://tdcenter.org/2022/12/13/survey-reconstruction-of-ukraine-and-international-aid/>; Gradus Research, "Wartime Survey of Ukrainian Society / Eleventh Wave," Gradus Research, February 28, 2022, <https://gradus.app/en/open-reports/wartime-survey-ukrainian-society-eleventh-wave/>.

Third, efforts to strengthen cohesion must distinguish between its two dimensions: horizontal cohesion (trust and cooperation among citizens) and vertical cohesion (trust between citizens and institutions). Fostering each requires different strategies. While horizontal cohesion benefits from participation and collective agency – for instance, when neighbors jointly rebuild damaged houses – vertical cohesion depends on visible results and government accountability. Importantly, survey data suggest that accountability matters more than flooding citizens with data on reconstruction. Transparency platforms, such as DREAM or Prozorro, provide open data on reconstruction, but only a small share of Irpin residents use them.

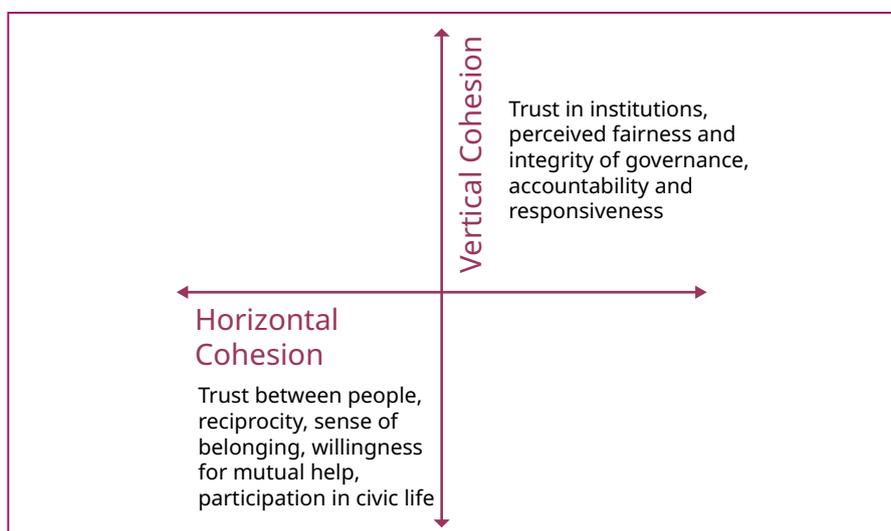
Although Irpin’s reconstruction is already at an advanced stage, and reconstruction is always context-specific, the patterns observed here can offer valuable guidance for the remaining recovery process and yield cautiously transferable lessons for other Ukrainian municipalities. To accomplish this, the report is structured as follows: Section two outlines the concept of social cohesion and its relevance for reconstruction. Section three describes the reconstruction environment in Irpin. Section four presents the survey results and qualitative insights. Finally, section five discusses implications for donors, practitioners and researchers working on Ukraine and outlines practical recommendations for socially cohesive post-war recovery.

Social Cohesion and Reconstruction During War

Large-scale reconstruction is never a neutral process. It is inherently an exercise in the distribution of resources, attention and opportunity, where decisions about what gets rebuilt first, whose homes or businesses are prioritized, and which areas receive the most support inevitably create winners and losers. These choices shape not only the material landscape of reconstruction, but also the social one, influencing whether citizens view reconstruction as fair, transparent and inclusive – or as corrupt and unequal. Here, the concept of social cohesion becomes analytically and practically useful. Social cohesion captures the degree of trust and solidarity within a society and between citizens and their institutions. It has two interlinked dimensions: **horizontal cohesion**, the cooperation, trust and mutual support among people, and **vertical cohesion**, the

Two interlinked dimensions

Figure 1



confidence and reciprocity between residents and the state.¹ Moments of large-scale redistribution, such as post-war reconstruction, put both to a rigorous test.

¹ Joseph Chan, Ho-Pong To, and Elaine Chan, “Reconsidering Social Cohesion: Developing a Definition and Analytical Framework for Empirical Research,” *Social Indicators Research* 75, no. 2 (2006): 273–302, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-005-2118-1>; Julia Leininger et al., “Social Cohesion: A New Definition and a Proposal for Its Measurement in Africa,” Discussion Paper 31/2021 (Bonn: German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2021), 4, https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/DP_31.2021.v1.1.pdf; Valarie Vat Kamatsiko, “Vertical Social Cohesion: Linking Concept to Practice,” *Peace and Conflict Studies* 28, no. 1 (2021): Article 5, <https://doi.org/10.46743/1082-7307/2021.1782>

In Ukraine, this is already a practical policy concern, not merely a theoretical one. When recovery is perceived as transparent and inclusive, it can reinforce the collective solidarity that has sustained communities through the war. Conversely, if reconstruction is viewed as unequal or captured by elites, it risks undermining that solidarity and eroding trust in government institutions. For policymakers and donors, the implication is straightforward: understanding how reconstruction shapes social cohesion is essential for ensuring recovery is both effective and durable.

The Reconstruction Environment in Irpin

Timeline

Before the liberation of Irpin on March 28, 2022, the city was partially occupied and subjected to heavy artillery, gun and rocket fire from Russian ground and air forces. These attacks killed as many as 300 civilians and caused some of the most severe destruction seen anywhere in Ukraine in the early phase of the invasion: up to 75 percent of the city's infrastructure and buildings were damaged.² After Ukrainian forces successfully repelled Russian troops in the battle for Kyiv, Irpin became one of the first cities to develop a complex, multi-level reconstruction financing system supported by a corresponding decision-making structure. Given the scale of devastation and the urgency of recovery, this multi-layered system emerged organically in response to immediate needs rather than through prior planning.

Immediately after liberation, recovery began with individuals clearing debris and quickly led to the formation of volunteer groups for mutual reconstruction support. While many of these groups remained informal and short-term, some evolved into professional volunteer organizations³ – including NGOs such as “Dobrobat” and “B50” – which eventually expanded their activities beyond Irpin. Due to the sheer scale of destruction, local leadership quickly recognized that, in addition to volunteer groups and local and national reconstruction funding, Irpin would need to mobilize significant private capital for its reconstruction. For this purpose, the Irpin Recovery Fund was established in April 2022. Founded by then-acting mayor Oleksandr Markushyn, billionaire member of parliament (MP) Serhii Taruta, and former mayor Volodymyr Karpluk, the fund emerged as a de facto hybrid public-private mechanism designed to attract capital and support the city's limited fundraising and coordination capacities.⁴

Critical infrastructure restoration reached early milestones with the reopening of the first school on September 1, 2022, attended by President Volodymyr Zelensky.⁵ Strategic planning partnerships also took shape later that year, including a collaboration with Gensler, an architectural firm, which developed a comprehensive urban plan for Irpin's reconstruction.⁶ On January 12, 2023, UNITED24, a government-run fundraising platform, launched its “Rebuild Ukraine” program in Irpin, targeting 18 apartment buildings across the city and neighboring municipalities to enable the return of 4,237 residents through a UAH 719 million (ca. EUR 15 million) initiative funded by international donors, the state budget and resident contributions.⁷ Further major milestones included the November 20, 2023 reopening of the bridge over the Irpin River, replacing the structure that Ukrainian forces had destroyed to defend Kyiv during the opening months of the invasion.⁸

By October 2025, Irpin had achieved a remarkable physical recovery: critical infrastructure had been fully restored, and social infrastructure – including education, health care and social services – had reached 90 percent completion.⁹ Housing, while still below pre-war levels, had recovered to roughly 80 percent.¹⁰ Notwithstanding this impressive progress, the reconstruction process has revealed institutional vulnerabilities, particularly regarding corruption. The suspension of former Mayor Markushyn in January 2025 amid corruption allegations, illustrates this challenge. Beyond triggering an institutional crisis, the case underscores widespread public concerns about the integrity of reconstruction processes in Ukraine.

² REACH Initiative and UN OCHA, “Ukraine: Residential Building Damage Assessment – Irpin, Kyivska Oblast, February–March 2022,” ReliefWeb, September 23, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-residential-building-damage-assessment-irpin-kyivska-oblast-february-march-2022>.

³ B50 Volunteer Community, “B50 Restoration,” August 5, 2024, <https://b50.com.ua/en/activities-en/restoration-en/>; Dobrobat, “Dobrobat is a volunteer building division,” April 23, 2023, <https://www.dobrobat.in.ua/en/>; Rubryka, “How the volunteer construction battalion Dobrobat works,” November 21, 2023, <https://rubryka.com/en/article/yak-pratsyuye-budbataljon-dobrobat/>.

⁴ Тетяна Лутай, “Декуповані і частково відбудовані: що і за скільки відновили в Ірпені, Бучі та Гостомелі,” Українська Правда, 18 квітня 202, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2023/04/18/7398362/>.

⁵ Office of the President of Ukraine, “Volodymyr Zelenskyy Visited a School in Irpin That Was Restored after Hostilities and Observed the Organization of the Educational Process under Martial Law,” President of Ukraine, September 1, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodymyr-zelenskij-vidvidav-vidnovlenu-pislya-bojovih-dij-s-77481>.

⁶ IRSUA, “Irpin Future Restoration for Ukraine - IRS,” January 2024, https://irsua.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/05112023_Irpin_Future-Vision-Plan-Report_NV_Reduced-1.pdf.

⁷ UNITED24, “UNITED24 Launches the Rebuild Ukraine Program,” January 11, 2023, https://u24.gov.ua/news/rebuild_launched.

⁸ Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, “Oleksandr Kubrakov: Bridge over the Irpin River opened to traffic,” November 20, 2023, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/oleksandr-kubrakov-vidkryto-rukh-mostom-cherz-richku-irpin>.

⁹ DREAM Newsroom, “Community Experience: Restoration Challenges and Working with DREAM,” DREAM, October 1, 2024, <https://dream.gov.ua/news/article-26>.

¹⁰ Dana Balashova, “The City That Doesn't Stop: Three Years of Irpin's Restoration,” Pragmatika Media, October 5, 2025, <https://pragmatika.media/en/misto-shcho-ne-zupy-niaietsia-try-roky-vidnovlennia-irpenia/>.

Funding Streams, Decision-Making and Transparency

Reconstruction in Irpin is defined by multi-stream, non-centralized financial flows. Four primary sources shape the funding ecosystem:

- 1. Ukrainian public budget** – Ukraine’s government and city council coordinate the allocation of state, regional and municipal funding.
- 2. International donors** – Key contributions from international donors are executed both directly and via multi-agency platforms, often independent of local government budgeting.
- 3. Charity and crowdfunding** – Charitable aid and international philanthropy are channeled through local NGOs like the Irpin Recovery Fund, national platforms like UNITED24, as well as private donation initiatives.
- 4. Individual and business contributions** – Smaller housing and utility repairs are often covered directly by residents or local businesses.

Currently, decision-making authority in Irpin rests primarily with Angela Makeeva, the acting mayor, who also chairs the Executive Committee responsible for allocating reconstruction funds. Yet there is no single bottleneck for spending or coordination, as not all funds pass through the committee. While international reconstruction contributions and charitable donations are often coordinated with local authorities, many remain independently managed. This creates a complex, multi-level funding ecosystem – somewhat opaque, but resilient in avoiding a single point of failure.

Ukraine’s reconstruction transparency system mirrors this multi-layered approach, aiming to mitigate corruption risks and manage vast, multi-donor funding flows. The DREAM platform, which was launched in March 2023, serves as the central registry of public reconstruction investments.¹¹ Prozorro, Ukraine’s national e-procurement system, facilitates transparent and competitive bidding, while the EU-financed Big Recovery Portal independently tracks thousands of reconstruction projects. Together, these platforms theoretically expand public access to reconstruction data. In practice, however, as will be discussed later in this report, usage remains low, compliance is uneven¹² (e.g., with infrequent progress reports), and emergency exemptions and weak enforcement allow projects to bypass official oversight.¹³ These vulnerabilities not only limit transparency but also reinforce broader concerns about corruption in the reconstruction process.

Survey Results

Methodology

To better understand how reconstruction affects social cohesion at the local level, this report draws on a face-to-face survey conducted by the Razumkov Centre from July 18-22, 2025, with 610 residents of Irpin. The survey sample is demographically diverse in terms of gender, age, income, and displacement status, with a theoretical sample error below 4 percent. The survey captured citizens’ perceptions of the reconstruction process and its broader social effects, focusing on three interrelated dimensions: (1) the perceived fairness and transparency of reconstruction decisions and funding; (2) trust in local and central authorities, as well as in fellow residents; and (3) participation and cooperation, including informal solidarity and engagement in local decision-making. By examining these aspects, the survey identifies potential sources of both vertical and horizontal cohesion as well as points of tension within Irpin’s recovery process. The results provide an empirical foundation for assessing whether reconstruction strengthens or undermines the social fabric upon which Ukraine’s broader recovery depends.

Perceptions of Progress and Fairness

Overall, Irpin’s residents express a broadly positive view of the city’s physical recovery but remain divided in their assessment of how reconstruction resources are distributed and managed. Most respondents acknowledged visible progress in the

¹¹ Oleksii Klapushynskyi, “DREAM Will Show It All: How Ukraine’s Reconstruction Is Going, How Much It Costs, and Who Pays,” VoxUkraine, August 19, 2025, <https://voxukraine.org/en/dream-will-show-it-all-how-ukraine-s-reconstruction-is-going-how-much-it-costs-and-who-pays>.

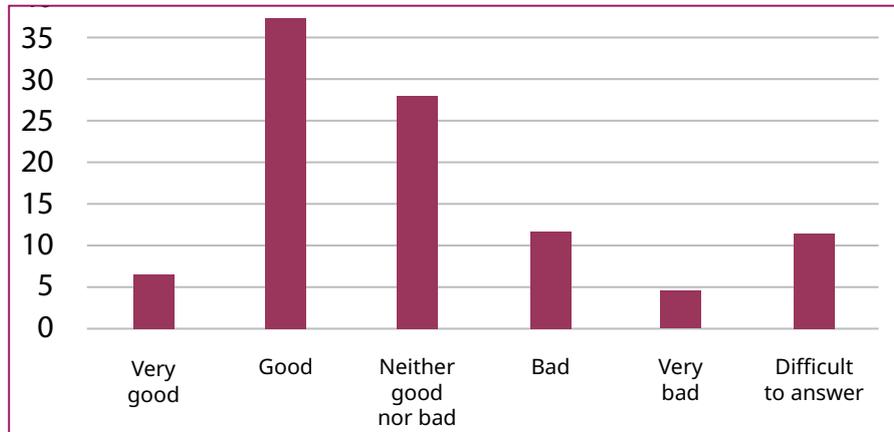
¹² Transparency International Ukraine, “Experience of Ukrainian Communities in Using the DREAM System,” Transparency International Ukraine, 2024, <https://ti-ukraine.org/en/research/experience-of-ukrainian-communities-in-using-the-dream-system/>.

¹³ Oleh Ivanov, “Procurement during the Full-Scale War,” VoxUkraine, <https://voxukraine.org/en/procurement-during-the-full-scale-war>

restoration of housing, infrastructure and public services, with a majority (43.9 percent) stating that reconstruction progress is either very good or good, and only 15 percent of respondents reporting the opposite.

How would you assess the current progress in rebuilding Irpin?

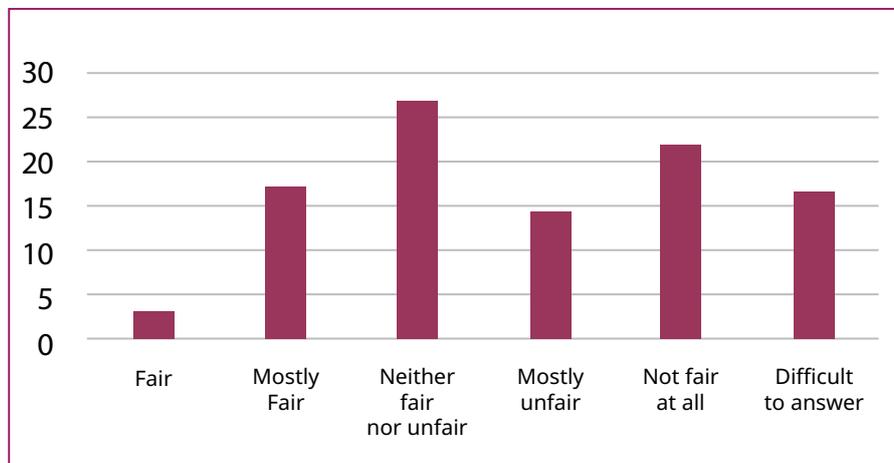
Figure 2



Yet optimism about material recovery exists alongside persistent doubts about fairness and accountability. A significant share of respondents believe reconstruction benefits are distributed inequitably, with political connections or personal wealth shaping who receives preferential treatment. In fact, a substantial share perceives reconstruction as mostly unfair or not fair at all.

Is the process of reconstruction in Irpin fair or not?

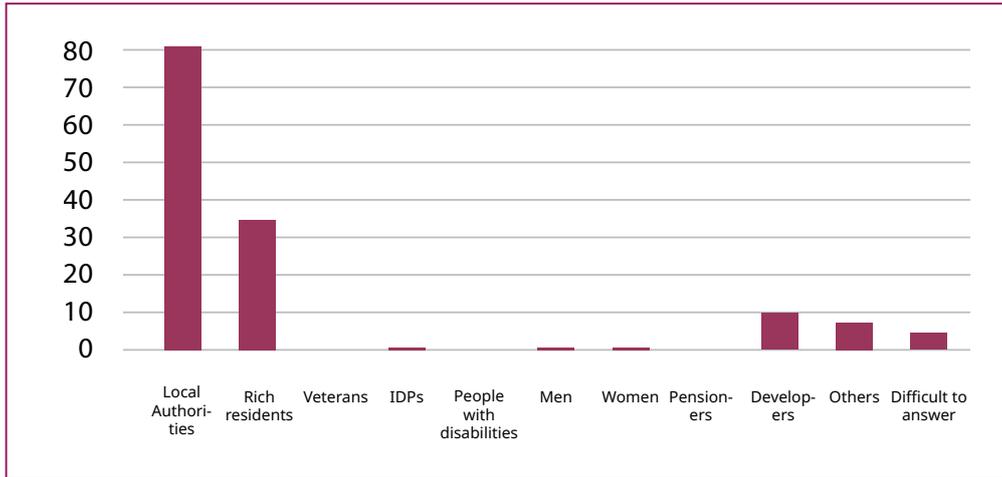
Figure 3



Interestingly, respondents identified elites, not other social groups within the general population, as the primary beneficiaries of the reconstruction process. While conflict studies literature often suggests that tensions emerge between groups such as ethnic communities, IDPs, veterans, or local civilians, the survey data from Irpin tell a different story. The dominant line of perceived inequality runs vertically between ordinary residents and elites: indeed, 81.3 percent of respondents pointed to local authorities, and 35.5 percent to wealthy residents, as receiving undue advantages of reconstruction.

Which groups do you believe benefit unduly from reconstruction in Irpin?

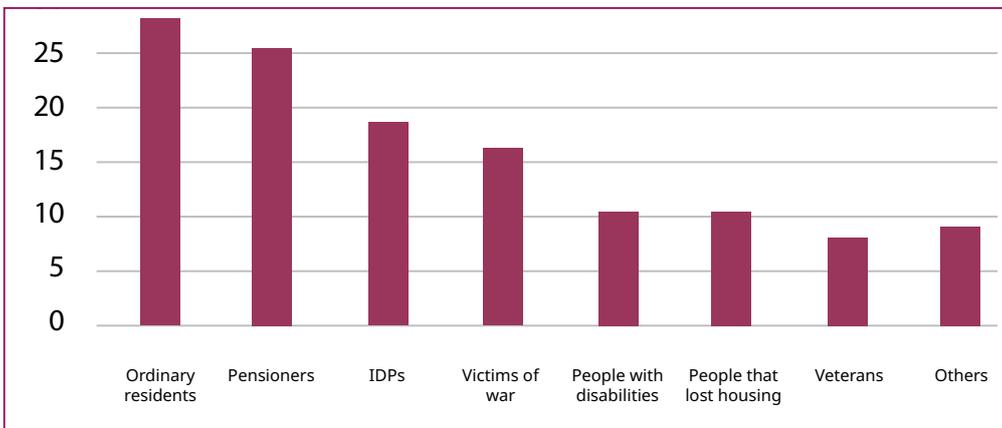
Figure 4



Taken together, these findings paint a two-sided picture of social cohesion. On one hand, the absence of inter-group conflict suggests that horizontal cohesion – trust and solidarity between residents – has remained largely intact despite perceived unfairness. On the other hand, the sense that elites benefit disproportionately from reconstruction undermines vertical cohesion, weakening trust between citizens and institutions.

Which groups do you believe are left behind?

Figure 5

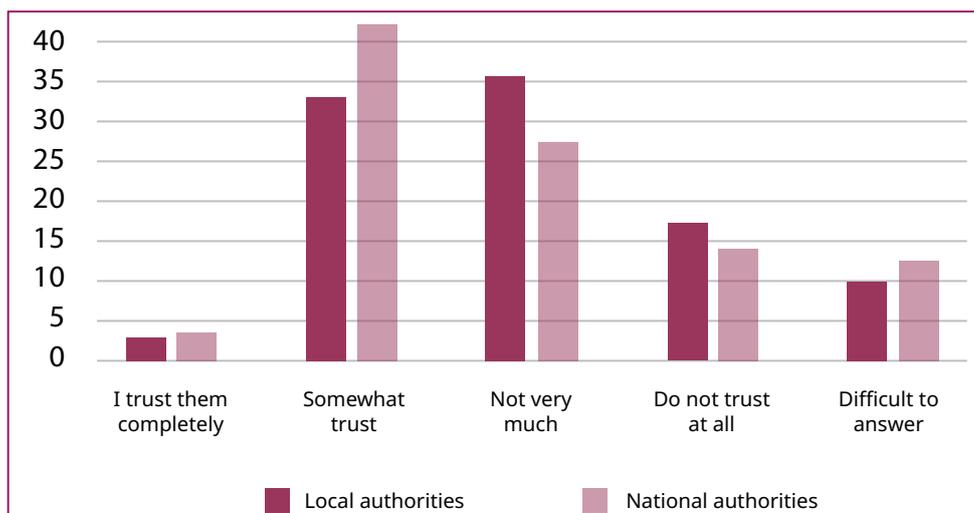


These findings have direct implications for both researchers and practitioners working on issues of reconstruction in Ukraine. The fact that distributive tensions in Irpin run primarily between citizens and institutions – rather than between social groups – calls for a critical re-examination of existing assumptions. Much of the current knowledge and academic research on reconstruction stems from civil war contexts over the past three decades, which differ fundamentally from Ukraine’s experience of large-scale external aggression and national mobilization. While comparative insights remain invaluable, the Irpin data caution against uncritically transferring patterns from other post-conflict settings to Ukraine, as doing so may lead to misguided conclusions.

The data also underscore the central role of institutional credibility and trust in reconstruction. When asked whether they trust authorities to use reconstruction funds responsibly, 52.4 percent of Irpin residents said they do not trust local authorities, while 41.7 percent expressed little or no trust in national institutions. These findings align with widespread perceptions of unfairness in how reconstruction benefits are allocated. When residents perceive favoritism or elite capture, mistrust grows – both in reconstruction as a process and in the institutions leading it.

Figure 6

To what extent do you trust local and central authorities to use reconstruction funds responsibly?



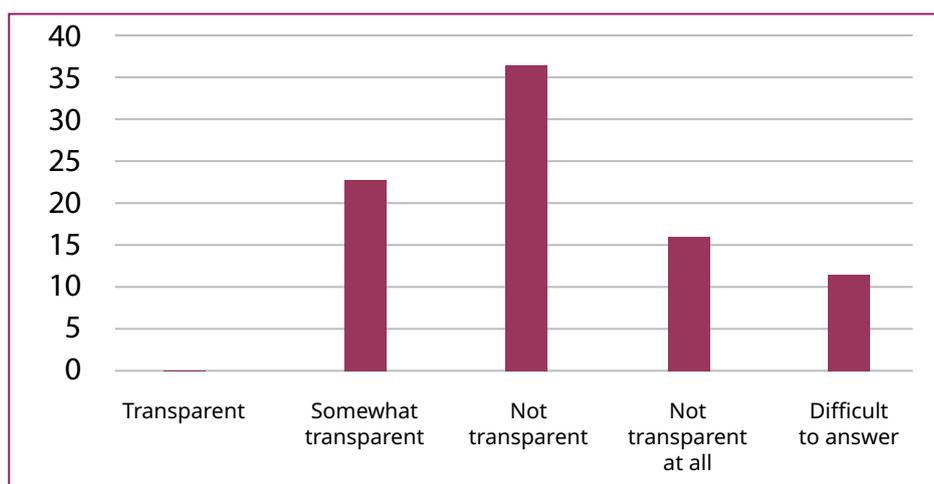
Such perceptions erode vertical social cohesion and risk reversing the surge in public trust in authority that followed Russia’s invasion. Indeed, while national polls showed a sharp rise in confidence in the government during the early months of the war, more recent data suggest this trend is weakening¹⁴ – though the specific drivers of that decline remain to be researched.¹⁵

Transparency and Participation

Surveyed residents of Irpin broadly recognize progress in reconstruction, but many have only a partial understanding or no understanding at all of how key decisions are made. Most respondents report that they are not well-informed about how priorities for reconstruction are determined or how funds are allocated.

Figure 7

How transparent is the decision-making process about reconstruction projects in Irpin?



These results can be interpreted in two ways: either Irpin residents do not receive sufficient information about reconstruction efforts, or they do not believe in the accuracy of the information they are able to access. While both are possible (and

14 KIIS, “Dynamics of Trust in Social Institutions in 2021–2022,” Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, <https://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1174&page=1>.

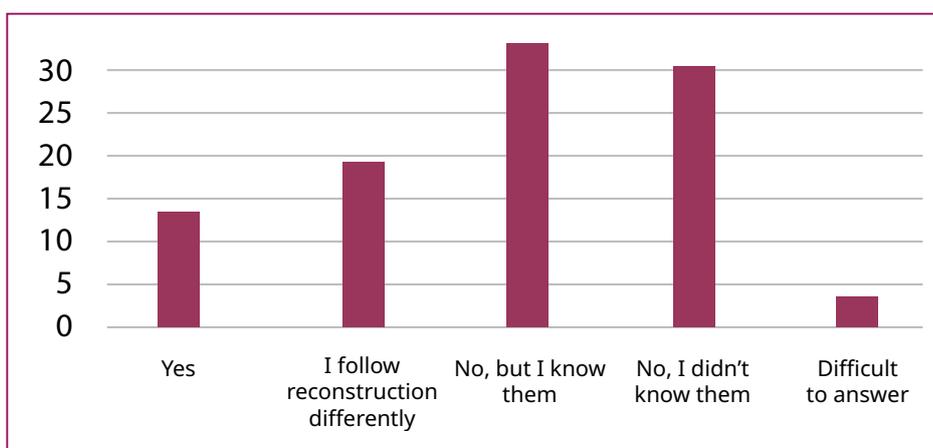
15 KIIS, “Dynamics of Trust in Social Institutions 2021–2024,” Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1467&page=1>.

arguably likely), survey data suggest that the transparency problem begins with information distribution. Ukraine and its international partners have developed multiple digital transparency and information tools for reconstruction. When asked if these are actually used, however, the overwhelming majority of respondents (82.7 percent) said that they do not monitor tools such as DREAM, Prozorro or the Big Reconstruction portal.

Worryingly, the data further reveal that these services are being underutilized, despite relatively high levels of awareness about them among Irpin residents (33.1 percent). This suggests a clear lack of confidence in their usefulness and raises serious questions about their actual effectiveness. Some interviewees even suggested that the primary audience for these portals may not be Ukrainians, but rather international donors who expect visible proof of transparency. While such performative transparency may help sustain donor confidence and continued investment in Ukraine’s recovery, it also carries risk. In a context of limited resources, prioritizing highly publicized but seldom-used transparency mechanisms can appear as a questionable allocation of funds – and, more importantly, may erode domestic trust if citizens perceive transparency as symbolic rather than substantive.

Have you used online information portals to track reconstruction?

Figure 8

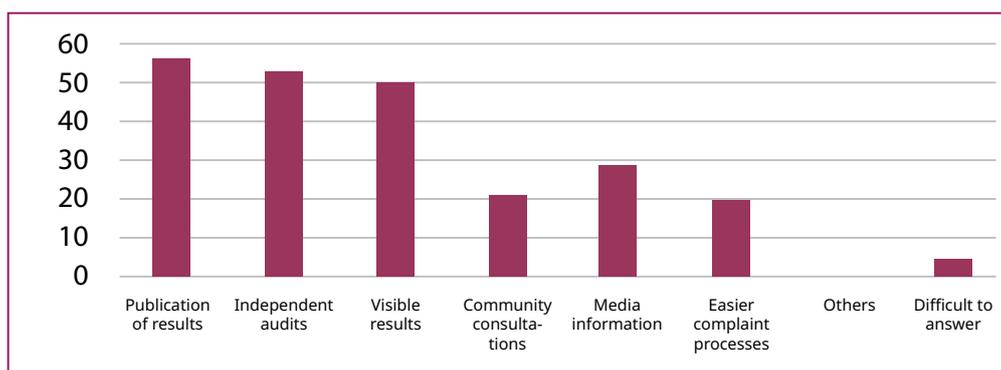


At the same time, the data indicate that residents’ mistrust in reconstruction is not fixed. When asked what would increase their confidence in local authorities, respondents offered strikingly pragmatic answers. The three most frequently cited measures were the regular publication of reconstruction results (56.4 percent), the conduct of independent audits (52.8 percent), and the visible demonstration of real outcomes (50.5 percent). By contrast, fewer than one in four respondents identified public hearings (21 percent) or simplified complaints procedures (20.8 percent) as decisive. This pattern suggests that citizens’ trust hinges less on formal participation mechanisms and more on tangible accountability and demonstrable performance. In other words, residents are not asking for more information – they are asking for proof.

This finding further challenges the prevailing donor emphasis on digital transparency tools. To strengthen vertical cohesion, what matters most is not the proliferation of portals and reports, but credible, visible evidence that reconstruction delivers fairly and effectively: independently audited projects, verifiable outcomes, and the consistent public verification of how reconstruction funds are spent.

What could persuade you to trust the reconstructions process more?

Figure 9



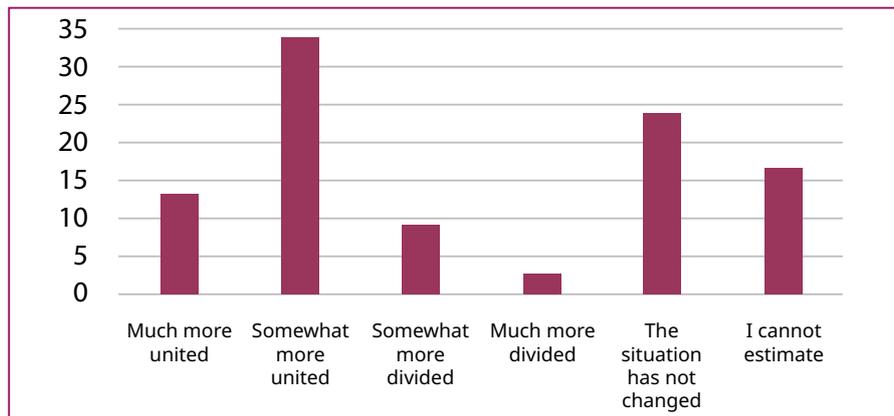
Trends in Horizontal Social Cohesion

While Irpin’s residents express widespread concerns about fairness and corruption in reconstruction, the survey data indicate that these perceptions have not eroded social relations within the community. Horizontal social cohesion – trust, cooperation and mutual support among citizens – remains comparatively resilient.

A plurality of respondents (43.8 percent) report that trust between people in Irpin has remained stable during the reconstruction period, while those who believe it has increased (16.4 percent) and those who see a decline (16.6 percent) are almost evenly divided. When asked to compare the present with the period before the full-scale invasion, the picture becomes slightly more positive: 47 percent of residents describe Irpin’s community as “somewhat” or “much more” united today, whereas only 12 percent perceive it as more divided. Similarly, half of respondents (50 percent) report that people are now more likely to help one another than before the war.

Compared to the time before 24 February 2022, Irpin residents are:

Figure 10

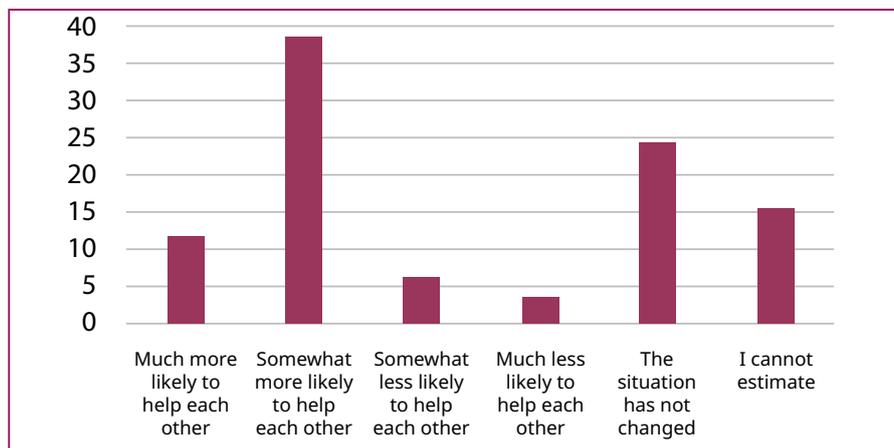


These quantitative findings are consistent with qualitative interview evidence. Interviewees frequently described how informal mutual support and self-organized reconstruction efforts (e.g., through neighborhood initiatives and local NGOs) brought people closer together. They highlighted how shared work on debris removal, small repairs, collective purchasing, and distribution of materials helped to forge practical bonds among residents. Several interviewees also underscored the importance of experienced agency: acting together to repair damage, rather than waiting for official channels, was seen as restoring a sense of control after the destruction and contributing to everyday trust and reciprocity.

Indeed, informal solidarity remains a visible feature of daily life. Nearly half of respondents (48 percent) say that residents in their neighborhoods “often” or “very often” provide one another with informal assistance, and more than a quarter (27 percent) say they have participated in volunteer activities during the past year. These figures are striking, given that three years have passed since Irpin’s liberation, suggesting that the civic mobilization that emerged during the fighting continues to sustain community social relations throughout the recovery period.

Compared to the time before 24 February 2022, Irpin residents are:

Figure 11



Overall, reconstruction appears to have had a mildly integrative effect. Nearly one-in-three respondents (29.5 percent) say that Irpin's residents have become closer to one another as a result of reconstruction, compared to just 9.7 percent who believe that social distance has grown. These findings suggest that Irpin's wartime and post-occupation experiences have preserved – and in some respects even deepened – horizontal cohesion. Doubts about institutional fairness have not eroded confidence in one another. Instead, residents continue to rely on informal networks, local initiatives and civic organizations as their main sources of support and collective problem-solving.

Discussion and Recommendations

The findings outlined above point to a pattern that diverges from much of the comparative reconstruction literature. First, distributive tensions in Irpin run primarily vertically – between residents and political-administrative elites – rather than horizontally between social groups. This contrasts sharply with the group-based distributive conflicts often emphasized in studies of post-civil war reconstruction. The Irpin case, therefore, cautions against the uncritical transfer of assumptions from civil-war contexts to Ukraine's distinct wartime and post-occupation conditions.

Second, the results show that data alone does not build trust. Institutional credibility, the survey suggests, depends more on verified performance than on the mere availability of data. Only a small minority of respondents report using national transparency portals to track local recovery, whereas the regular publication of results, independent audits, and visibly completed projects rank as the most effective measures for strengthening trust. In short, information infrastructure is not, in itself, a trust-building device.

Third, despite concerns about fairness, horizontal social cohesion has remained intact and, in some respects, has even deepened. Residents report greater unity and mutual assistance than before the full-scale invasion, and a larger share observes that reconstruction has brought people closer together than believes it has driven them apart. This points to a clear decoupling: skepticism toward institutions has not eroded the fabric of everyday social relations.

Two cohesion-inducing factors stand out. First, real and accountable progress matters more than the multiplication of transparency tools. Second, horizontal cooperation remains a quiet but enduring strength. Neighbor-to-neighbor assistance, self-organized repair, and the shared experience of collective action after devastation continue to weave social ties that formal institutions alone have not been able to restore. Together, these patterns suggest a clear orientation for the recommendations that follow: to rebuild vertical trust, prioritize visible results, accountability and people-centered communication; to sustain horizontal cohesion, invest in the local initiatives through which residents already solve problems and exercise agency.

1. Prioritize accountability over portal proliferation and communicate audit results in channels that residents actually use.

☑ **Rationale:** In Irpin, public confidence responds more to verified delivery than to an abundance of data. Accountability should therefore be embedded throughout the project cycle and communicated clearly – not through complex digital or online tools, but through accessible and trusted communication channels that residents already use in their daily lives. This would ensure that transparency is experienced, not just published.

☑ **Implementation:**

- **Independent audit for major projects.** Commission proportionate financial/technical checks and issue a brief audit note at the end of each reconstruction project (scope, findings and corrections made).
- **Visible proof of completion.** Publish a one-page completion summary (objective, scope delivered, cost vs. plan, timeline vs. plan) with simple before-and-after evidence. To showcase results, consider publishing short walk-through videos or before-and-after photos.
- **Resident-facing dissemination.** Disseminate summaries and audit notes through popular communications platforms, including Telegram and Viber, local media, and other outlets that residents use in their daily lives.
- **Single feedback line.** Provide both a phone and email contact to field complaints.

2. Scale social cohesion by resourcing what sustains it.

☑ **Rationale:** In Irpin, neighbor-to-neighbor help, self-organized repair, and small NGOs have underpinned everyday cooperation and built horizontal social cohesion. Where possible, these mechanisms should be supported and scaled.

☑ **Implementation:**

- **Micro-grants.** Provide small grants for community-level repairs via capable local initiatives/NGOs, with minimal paperwork and clear accountability standards.
- **Designated community projects.** Resource small reconstruction projects, ideally ones that do not require heavy equipment or extensive professional contracting (e.g., rebuilding a green space or a playground), as arenas for participation in reconstruction. Encourage resident-led proposals, supply capped budgets, and offer light oversight to allow residents to engage proactively in reconstruction and experience community and agency.
- **Core support for small reconstruction NGOs.** Offer flexible operating grants (e.g., for staff, rent and basic equipment) to sustain proven local actors that coordinate self-help; apply proportionate due diligence and require brief public reporting of completed works through popular communications platforms and local media.

3. Do not import civil-war lessons

☑ **Rationale:** International practitioners and researchers primarily rely on reconstruction experience and knowledge accumulated in civil war contexts. The example of Irpin demonstrates that these expectations can differ dramatically from local realities in Ukraine. As such, importing hypotheses from other contexts can lead to misplaced assessments or conclusions about the situation Ukraine is facing. This, in turn, can create a mismatch between the needs that reconstruction practitioners aim to address with their policies and the needs that actually exist on the ground.

☑ **Implementation:**

- **For international practitioners:** Interrogate your assumptions. Identify where they come from and which experiences and contexts underpin them. Then, interrogate whether they apply to Ukraine and what differs. If uncertain, prioritize generating new knowledge grounded in local evidence, rather than transferring expectations from other cases.
- **For researchers:** Treat findings on civil war reconstruction as hypotheses. Interrogate these findings and determine whether they are relevant to the case of Ukraine before applying them. Whenever possible, ground analysis in empirical data, and collaborate with Ukrainian researchers to ensure sensitivity to the local context.

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Reconstructing Trust: Social Cohesion and Recovery

in Wartorn Irpin, Ukraine



Despite its distributive nature, reconstruction in Irpin has not fragmented society along group lines. Competition over resources has not translated into tensions between local residents, internally displaced persons, or veterans. Instead, group-based divisions common in many post-civil war settings have remained largely absent in Irpin's recovery.



The main fault line runs vertically between citizens and institutions. Perceived unfairness, elite capture, and corruption concerns have eroded trust in local authorities, while transparency platforms have failed to restore credibility. Institutional trust depends less on data availability than on visible delivery, independent audits, and verifiable results.



Horizontal social cohesion is sustained and strengthened through local cooperation and citizen agency. Bottom-up participation - including neighbor-to-neighbor support, volunteer reconstruction, and self-organized initiatives - has reinforced trust and cohesion. Where residents experience agency in reconstruction, recovery becomes a source of social integration rather than division.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

➤ ukraine.fes.de