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SHAPING VALUES IN CRISIS: NONPROFIT ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND ITS EVOLVING ROLE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

ФОРМУВАННЯ ЦІННОСТЕЙ В УМОВАХ КРИЗИ: НЕПРИБУТКОВА ОРГАНІЗАЦІЙНА КУЛЬТУРА ТА ЇЇ ЕВОЛЮЦІОНУЮЧА РОЛЬ У 21-МУ СТОЛІТТІ

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This review article explores the evolving nature of organisational culture within nonprofit organisations (NPOs), especially in the face of crisis, societal transformation and digitalisation. Drawing upon a wide range of theoretical frameworks and recent research, including comparative and regional studies in nonprofit management and leadership, the article identifies key cultural dimensions that define NPOs, discusses leadership styles shaping those cultures and examines how recent global and regional crises have accelerated cultural shifts. By emphasising the interplay between culture, leadership (situational, adaptive, participative and ethical) and organisational outcomes such as commitment, job satisfaction and proactivity, this paper contributes to a growing body of literature that views culture as a dynamic and strategic organisational asset. It calls for greater contextualisation in nonprofit cultural studies, with special attention to post-crisis environments, digital workspaces and the influence of cross-sector leadership experiences.

Keywords: nonprofit organisations, organisational culture, leadership, crisis response, Ukraine.

У цій оглядовій статті розглядається еволюція організаційної культури неприбуткових організацій (НПО) в умовах криз, цифрової трансформації та суспільних викликів XXI століття. На основі міждисциплінарного аналізу, що охоплює як західні, так і українські наукові джерела, досліджуються ключові культурні елементи, що формують ідентичність неприбуткових організацій, а також стилі лідерства, які сприяють адаптації, згуртованості та стійкості в умовах нестабільності. Особлива увага приділяється українському контексту, а саме війні, волонтерському руху та трансформації громадянського суспільства. Це ж прикладом того, як культура виконує стабілізуючу та мобілізаційну функції. Також було введено поняття гібридного професіоналізму як важливого чинника, що об'єднує ціннісно вмотивовану діяльність з професійними підходами до управління. Розглядаються також адаптивне, етичне, ситуативне та партисипативне лідерство як ключові стилі, що формують організаційну культуру. Акцент робиться на необхідності розвитку інклюзивного та ціннісно орієнтованого управління, яке відповідає викликам посткризового суспільства. У статті пропонуються авторські міркування щодо формування культури в умовах цифрової взаємодії, обмежених ресурсів і високої емоційної напруги. Підкреслюється, що культура в НПО є не статичним фоном, а активним чинником, що впливає на прийняття рішень, згуртованість команди та стратегічну гнучкість. Методологія дослідження ґрунтується на структурованому аналізі літератури, що включав систематичний підбір джерел за ключовими словами ("nonprofit culture", "adaptive leadership", "Ukraine" тощо), з подальшим контентним аналізом і тематичним узагальненням. До аналізу були включені наукові публікації, а також аналітичні звіти українських і міжнародних організацій. Робота також визначає прогалини в науковій літературі щодо культури в НПО у конфліктних зонах, закликаючи до розвитку локалізованих моделей, що враховують політичний, емоційний та організаційний контекст. Таким чином, ця стаття є внеском у переосмислення ролі культури як стратегічного ресурсу для неприбуткових організацій, які діють в умовах нестабільності.

Ключові слова: неприбуткові організації, організаційна культура, лідерство, кризовий менеджмент, Україна.

Statement of the Problem. Organisational culture has long been considered an essential part of effective nonprofit management. Defined broadly as a system of shared values, assumptions and beliefs that govern how people behave in organisations [17], culture influences everything from daily operations and decision-making to leadership and team dynamics. In nonprofit organisations, where material rewards are often limited and missions are socially driven, culture assumes even greater importance [9]. It becomes both a motivational force and a mechanism of internal cohesion, especially in environments of uncertainty or crises [10; 18]. As the growing complexity of global crises, ranging from pandemics and armed conflicts to digital disruption, has significantly affected how nonprofit organisations operate and sustain their missions. Amid these challenges, the role of organisational culture in shaping internal resilience, staff cohesion, and public trust has become more critical than ever. For mission-driven organisations that often function with limited resources and under conditions of high volatility, culture is not merely a background feature – it is a core driver of effectiveness and adaptability.

In the nonprofit sector, particularly in regions affected by conflict and systemic change such as Ukraine, culture determines how organisations navigate uncertainty, respond to community needs, and maintain their legitimacy. However, much of the existing literature continues to rely on theoretical models drawn from the corporate or public sectors, with limited attention to the unique cultural dynamics of NPOs. Furthermore, while leadership is often recognised as a key determinant of organisational culture, there remains a lack of clarity on how specific leadership styles influence cultural development during crisis. This problem is compounded by a relative lack of empirical and context-specific studies in Eastern Europe, where nonprofits are often deeply embedded in civil society activism, hybrid governance models, and volunteer-based networks. The cultural dimensions that sustain NPOs through crises, such as collective identity, shared values, and ethical leadership are under-theorised and poorly documented.

It has been observed how traditional frameworks often fall short in capturing the hybrid nature of nonprofit leadership and values under pressure. In this article, I aim to position culture not only as an analytical category but also as a lived practice, one that enables NPOs to maintain coherence and meaning even under

extreme external disruption. This article seeks to address these theoretical and empirical gaps by proposing a more dynamic, leadership-informed understanding of nonprofit organisational culture in crisis settings.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications. Organisational culture in the nonprofit sector has been the focus of growing academic attention, with researchers highlighting its central role in shaping motivation, governance, and performance. Foundational studies by Schein [17] conceptualise culture as a learned set of shared assumptions that guide behaviour and are transmitted through organisational life. Hofstede [12] offers a comparative lens by outlining cultural dimensions that vary across contexts, while Cameron and Quinn [7] developed the Competing Values Framework to demonstrate how different types of organisational culture align with internal goals and operational modes.

In the nonprofit context, values such as altruism, justice, inclusion, and service-orientation are often at the core of both mission and identity [18; 8]. Scholars note that these values influence not only interpersonal relationships within organisations but also leadership practices, volunteer engagement, and public legitimacy [10; 2]. Leadership research has increasingly focused on participative, ethical and adaptive models that reflect the collective, horizontal, and often informal structures common in nonprofits [11; 14; 20].

Despite this growing body of literature, major gaps remain. Much of the theoretical foundation is drawn from private and public sectors, making it less applicable to grassroots, hybrid, or crisis-affected nonprofits. Regional gaps are also significant. For instance, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and other conflict-prone areas are still underrepresented in scholarly work. Studies that do exist tend to be descriptive rather than analytical and often do not examine culture as a strategic asset shaped by leadership.

To build this article, a structured integrative literature review was conducted, following Torraco's methodology [19]. This approach included a combination of peer-reviewed journal articles, regional case studies, policy reports, and nonprofit sector analyses. I focused on studies published since 2000, with preference for sources addressing cultural change, leadership and resilience in nonprofit organisations. Databases consulted included Scopus, JSTOR, Web of Science, and Ukrainian analytical

platforms (such as the *Zagoriy Foundation* and *Ukrainian Prism*).

Importantly, a cross-comparison of Western and Ukrainian was made to identify both overlapping insights and culturally specific dynamics. In doing so, we can critically evaluate not only what organisational culture is in theory, but how it is constructed and lived in practice. Particularly in settings where external crises challenge the normative and functional integrity of the nonprofit model. This approach allowed to build a contextual, multi-layered understanding of how culture and leadership intersect in moments of instability.

Highlighting Previously Unresolved Parts of the Overall Problem. While existing scholarship has developed important conceptual models for understanding organisational culture, such as Schein's definition of shared assumptions [17], Hofstede's comparative cultural dimensions [12], and Cameron and Quinn's Competing Values Framework [7]. Still, much of this research remains rooted in corporate or public-sector paradigms. These models often fall short in capturing the complex realities faced by nonprofit organisations operating under crisis conditions, especially in conflict-affected contexts like Ukraine.

Moreover, despite the recognition that values such as altruism, justice, solidarity and participatory engagement are central to nonprofit identity [18], these dimensions are frequently discussed in abstract or normative terms, without sufficient analysis of how they are enacted, transformed or challenged during periods of intense disruption. Research that does explore nonprofit responses to crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russian invasion of Ukraine, tends to focus on operational resilience or service delivery adaptation [7; 3], rather than deep organisational culture change.

Another unresolved issue is the interaction between leadership styles and cultural development in NPOs. While adaptive, participative, and ethical leadership theories have been applied to nonprofit settings [12; 14; 20], few studies systematically investigate how these styles actually contribute to the shaping and sustaining of resilient cultures in the face of crisis. For example, in Ukrainian nonprofits that emerged from grassroots activism, leadership is often distributed and informal, yet the literature does not adequately address how such leadership structures influence cultural norms, cohesion or symbolic meaning-making in organisations under duress.

The Ukrainian nonprofit sector, particularly since 2014 and even more so following the full-scale invasion in 2022, presents a compelling empirical case for rethinking how we define and study culture in mission-driven, crisis-oriented institutions. However, it remains underrepresented in international scholarship, with only a limited number of regionally grounded studies, such as those by Lutsevych [14], Boyko [3] and Boichak and McKernan [5], that explicitly link leadership, culture and civic resilience.

This review article reveals a lack of longitudinal and ethnographically-informed studies that trace cultural evolution across crisis phases. Much of what is known about nonprofit adaptation comes from surveys or one-off case studies, which provide snapshots rather than developmental insights. Moreover, the digital transformation of nonprofit workspaces has introduced new cultural tensions that are only beginning to be explored in the academic literature [15]. It is clear that existing theories fail to account for hybrid professionalism, where nonprofit staff operate with both activist and managerial logics [3], or for the emergence of care-centered and trauma-informed organisational cultures, particularly in organisations working with displaced or highly vulnerable populations [16]. These are not merely operational innovations- they reflect deeper cultural shifts that remain analytically underexamined.

Therefore, this article aims to illuminate these gaps by conducting a structured, integrative literature review to examine the interaction between leadership and culture during a crisis. The aim is to move beyond prescriptive models and toward a more grounded understanding of organisational culture as a strategic, lived and evolving phenomenon in nonprofit organisations today.

Formation of the Objectives of the Article.

Given the limitations in the current literature, especially the lack of context-sensitive, crisis-responsive models of nonprofit organisational culture, this article sets out to investigate how cultural frameworks within NPOs are constructed, maintained and transformed in times of instability. It aims to do so by placing special emphasis on the leadership mechanisms that shape those cultures in post-crisis or high-volatility environments.

Building upon the conceptual contributions of Schein [17], Hofstede [12], and Cameron and Quinn [7], as well as region-specific insights

from Ukrainian nonprofit development [14; 3; 6], this article has the following objectives:

- To synthesise theoretical models of nonprofit organisational culture and leadership.
- To explore the intersection between leadership styles (adaptive, participative, situational, and ethical) and organisational cultural transformation in crisis contexts.
- To identify recent cultural shifts in nonprofit organisations caused by global crises, war, and digital transformation.
- To contextualise these developments within the Ukrainian nonprofit sector as a living case study of culture-driven resilience.

This work contributes to the development of a more dynamic, locally grounded understanding of nonprofit organisational culture that goes beyond Western-centric models. In doing so, it offers insights for scholars, practitioners and funders invested in the strategic potential of culture in nonprofit governance and adaptation.

Plan of Analysis. To achieve the objectives above, I conducted a structured integrative literature review based on Torraco’s guidelines [19], which support the systematic synthesis of theoretical, empirical and applied sources across disciplines. My review process included several stages: definition of criteria, selection of sources, thematic coding, and critical analysis.

In total, 48 sources were initially identified. After applying relevance, quality and duplication filters, a final set of 25 key sources was included in the analysis.

Through comparative reading, coding and synthesis, I identified key themes such as cultural hybridity, care-based leadership, digital

disruption, and the symbolic function of culture in mission retention. These themes structure the summary of the main research material in the next section.

Summary of the Main Research Material. Nonprofit organisational culture is rooted in values such as altruism, justice, solidarity and service, which underpin both mission and identity [18]. Norms of participatory governance, trust-based communication, and volunteer involvement form the core of internal dynamics [1]. Compared to private organisations, NPOs operate with fewer formal structures but higher normative expectations, facing the complex task of balancing the interests of donors, beneficiaries, and their teams [12; 17].

Based on the analysis of Ukrainian NPOs, several cultural features stand out. First, hybrid professionalism, where staff act both as activists and professionals, this is especially prominent in large-scale nonprofits. This dual role enhances flexibility and purpose but also creates internal tension between mission passion and formal accountability [3; 14]. Second, digitalisation has altered communication and rituals. According to the Zagoriy Foundation (2022), nonprofits have adapted to hybrid work, but this has challenged cohesion and informal learning. Many organisations responded by creating new digital rituals such as virtual check-ins or digital storytelling to maintain cultural continuity [3; 22].

Next, crises such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have not only disrupted but also transformed cultures. In our view, many Ukrainian NPOs have shifted from operational

Table 1

Selection Criteria and Source Evaluation

Stage	Criteria Applied	Explanation
1. Source Identification	Peer-reviewed journals, NpO reports, regional policy analyses	Emphasis on leadership, organisational culture, nonprofit management, and post-crisis resilience
2. Time Range	Published between 2000–2024 (exceptions for classical theories)	To reflect both foundational and current developments
3. Geographic Focus	Global with emphasis on Eastern Europe and Ukraine	To balance universal insights with local relevance
4. Thematic Focus	Organisational culture, leadership styles, crisis response, digital adaptation	Coded thematically for relevance to nonprofit sector-specific issues
5. Methodological Validity	Inclusion of empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, mixed-methods reports	Ensures a balance of conceptual and applied perspectives

Source: generated by the author

efficiency to cultural resilience by emphasising care, flexibility and inclusive leadership. Staff wellbeing, psychological safety, and empathy have emerged as cultural pillars, particularly in organisations supporting displaced or traumatised communities [15; 16].

Leadership is the primary mechanism through which these cultural shifts are anchored. Situational leadership, based on Hersey and Blanchard's framework, allows leaders to adapt behaviourally, for instance, moving from directing to supporting depending on team maturity [4]. Based on this comparative review of the literature and Ukrainian nonprofit practices, we can observe that effective leadership in crisis does not follow a single model. Instead, cultural resilience emerges when leadership styles are flexibly blended with attention to values, community expectations and real-time challenges. Moreover, this flexibility helped sustain services during blackout periods and then transition to rebuilding phases.

Participative leadership, aligned with post-Maidan civic norms, supports inclusiveness and shared responsibility [20]. Lutsevych [14] argues it strengthened mobilisation and accountability. We can observe similar dynamics in Kyiv-based organisations where team members co-created strategies, leading to higher ownership and democratic alignment.

Adaptive leadership, as described by Heifetz [11], is especially relevant in war-affected settings. Rather than enforcing fixed plans, leaders cultivate environments for problem-solving and experimentation. This leadership style complements hybrid professionalism, allowing for rapid response while upholding mission-driven values.

Ethical leadership serves as the moral anchor. In contexts of extreme uncertainty, ethical behaviour maintains trust and legitimacy [9]. Leaders who practice transparency and fairness through open budgeting or collective reflection, can help prevent mission drift and sustain cohesion [13; 21].

According to our analysis, effective nonprofit leaders in Ukraine blend these styles dynamically, depending on cultural, operational and emotional conditions. Culture is not only what an organisation believes, but it is how people behave when under pressure. The crisis has revealed that adaptive, participatory and ethical practices are not simply idealistic, but essential for resilience and continuity. As such, culture in nonprofit settings is not fixed, it is cultivated, challenged and reinvented through everyday decisions, especially in times of crisis.

Conclusions. Nonprofit organisational culture is not static- it is dynamic, negotiated and deeply embedded in mission, context, and leadership. Amid rising complexity and global crises, culture serves as both a compass and a cushion. It guides behaviour, fosters resilience, and sustains identity through disruption.

Drawing on this structured analysis of literature and Ukrainian civil society organisations, we can argue that culture evolves most effectively when leaders embody shared values and when organisations maintain coherence between their mission and their methods even in digital or post-conflict settings. This review contributes to the theoretical and practical understanding of nonprofit culture by proposing a context-sensitive, leadership-informed model. It underscores the importance of investing in values-based leadership, cultural rituals, and hybrid organisational practices that allow NPOs to remain both grounded and resilient. To build stronger and more equitable nonprofits, practitioners and scholars must approach culture as a living system, one which is responsive to context, shaped by leadership and animated by shared values.

Future work should further explore how culture is co-created within communities under pressure and how emerging digital and care-based practices are redefining the nonprofit ethos. As this article shows, in times of crisis, culture is not just what organisations preserve, but it is also how they adapt, survive and lead.

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