(NOT) THE RIGHT TIME?

Challenges and opportunities for public participation at the local level during the war

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following three years of full-scale war, trust in local authorities in Ukraine has remained the most stable of all government institutions, though it is also experiencing a relative decline. Protests such as the "Money for the Armed Forces" movement demonstrate that there is considerable **public attention** to the content of local authority decisions and their **fairness** and **effectiveness**. People may feel that **their voices have been left unheard**, especially when **elections as a tool of democracy are not available due to the war**. In this environment, the engagement of citizens in decision-making processes becomes paramount, as it is the only method of stabilizing trust, ensuring accountability, and forging a shared future vision. This is why engagement as a practice is more important than ever.

This policy brief seeks to examine the crises from the perspectives of both challenge and opportunity. Particularly in the context of Ukraine's hromadas facing unprecedented shocks as a result of the war, civic engagement plays a pivotal role in enhancing resilience and adaptability, while providing much-needed human resources. Is it possible to engage citizens when previous practices are limited, security is a major concern, and the demographic composition is changing daily? Yes, it is. However, **it depends on the reasons why hromada is doing it**.

This is not just an analysis of problems — it is a search for solutions. The report is grounded in the firsthand experiences of 181 hromadas and detailed case studies covering good examples of adaptation to war. The report draws from the experience of rural and urban hromadas that organize open spaces for dialogue, involve internally displaced persons in decision-making, and use digital platforms for transparent communication even in the most dangerous conditions. These are **practices that already work and can be scaled up to other hromadas (communities) and countries.** Initiatives such as public reports by local mayors, youth councils launching volunteer initiatives, or digital services represent tangible steps towards hromada transformation and the **restoration of citizens' trust.**

This document is not an attempt to sugarcoat the truth and talk about engagement as an end in itself. It must bring effective results. This report shows not only **the opportunities**, but also **the real problems** faced by local authorities. The main issues of citizen engagement, as our paper shows, are **low trust in the authorities, lack of awareness of participation opportunities, "politicization" of public participation, restrictions due to security during the war, and changes in the structure of the population.** Despite these challenges, hromada representatives confirm that engaging residents in governance remains both possible and necessary for local governments and residents. This report does not claim to offer ideal solutions. Instead, it presents real steps from the experience of actual hromadas that help them survive and adapt while **maintaining the trust of target groups and residents.**

INTRODUCTION

Public participation during war: what it is and its purpose

Ukraine's experience since the beginning of the full-scale invasion has shown that cooperation between local authorities and stakeholders is critical for the resilience of hromadas in times of crises. According to a survey conducted by the KSE Institute team in 2024, local authorities continue to engage various stakeholders in addressing war-related crises. Due to the uncertainty and depletion of resources, the war has forced hromadas to focus on pragmatic cooperation with non-governmental stakeholders. However, the makeup of stakeholders involved in problem-solving has changed. The KSE's research on hromadas'resilience in 2024 shows that hromadas where local authorities actively engage businesses, civil society organizations, and residents not only through one-way communication, but dialogue and partnerships are better prepared for war. However, in times of war and martial law, there are significant systemic obstacles and challenges related to physical danger, changing population structure, and motivations for participation when it comes to engaging stakeholders in cooperation with local authorities.

This policy brief is a "menu of ideas" for local authorities and hromada residents to address common challenges of organizing public participation in decision-making and crisis management in hromadas during wartime. The presented solutions are "good practices" that other hromadas can borrow and adapt to their own context. In our comments on the practices, we draw attention to the results of relevant research on their effectiveness, if any.

In this brief, public participation refers to a range of interactions between local authorities and hromada based on Council of Europe standards. These interactions include informing, which is unilateral communication from the authorities to residents about decisions, opportunities to access public services, data, and information. Consulting is unilateral communication from residents to the authorities proactively or at the request of the authorities about their needs, problems, feedback on the activities of the authorities), dialogue (two-way exchange of opinions, suggestions, criticism, ideas on local issues) and partnership (joint action to solve problems or ideas about local problems) and partnership (joint action to solve problems or promote local development).

Methods and structure of the policy brief

This brief is based on the results of the **analysis of the KSE survey of local authorities representatives** and the practical experience of KSE and Cedos partner hromadas. First, a basic list of public participation issues was identified based on a survey conducted in January-March 2024 with representatives of **181 hromadas**.[1]

Secondly, the policy paper draws on the results of a joint effort by KSE and Cedos with local authorities from 15 hromadas and experts in public participation during a partnership event in August 2024. Key participants included representatives of hromadas of different sizes, geographical locations and security status, urban and rural, with varying levels of previous

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[1] KSE conducted the survey in cooperation with the All-Ukrainian Association of Amalgamated Territorial hromadas, People in Need, and the National Platform for Resilience and Cohesion with the support of the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD).

experience in public participation (see Annex 1 for a list of hromadas). The discussion took place in a "world cafe" format — small group discussions on specific questions about prioritizing public engagement issues, their possible causes and existing or new solutions, with facilitators taking notes on the discussions. In addition, several hromadas were invited by the organizers to present their experiences of public engagement, both successes and challenges, and more or less successful attempts to work with them. For this brief, the authors have summarized and systematized the small group facilitators' notes and examples from participants, and added examples of solutions from other sources.

The results were also validated with **13 hromadas participating** in the ICLD Network for Democratic Resilience partnership network at a meeting of Ukrainian and Swedish municipalities in Brussels in November 2024. Validation took place through a discussion of the results and a follow-up questionnaire.

The brief is structured as follows:

- Chapter 1 summarizes two systemic obstacles that determine the ability of local authorities to establish cooperation with the public, but are almost beyond their control: the availability of human resources in hromada and the interaction of local authorities with district and regional military administrations.

- Chapters 2-6 summarize five typical challenges to public participation based on the survey and prioritization by participants at the "world cafe": low trust in the authorities, lack of awareness of opportunities for participation, "politicization" of public participation, restrictions due to security during the war, and changes in the composition of the population that make usual practices less effective. Each problem is summarized by its causes, and examples of solutions from the practice of Ukrainian hromadas are presented.

- The paper concludes in Chapter 7.

SYSTEMIC OBSTACLES:

Uncoordinated interaction between local authorities and local military administrations, shortage and overburdening of local authority specialists

Uncoordinated interaction between local authorities, district and regional military administrations

Solving critical problems and actively involving citizens at the regional and hromada levels requires **not only good decision-making by each actor of power but also close and effective cooperation between them.** Each element of the power vertical should be working towards common goals. In practice, however, we often face a number of obstacles that impede effective interaction.

One of the biggest issues is **the duplication of forms of citizen engagement**, such as roundtables, meetings and public discussions at different levels. For example, residents may participate in discussions at the invitation of their local authorities. However, **when they are offered a similar meeting at the level of the district or regional military administration**, their motivation to repeat **the same thing** for other government officials decreases. The reason is that citizens frequently **do not see real results** or clear **communication about the outcomes of previous meetings**. The factor of **negative experience in engagement** for many activists, as our research shows, is **a priority motivation to refuse to participate** in the processes of the city or region in general.

Opportunities for citizen engagement are further limited by the lack of coordination between local authorities and those at the district and regional levels. The lack of coordination is particularly noticeable in frontline, borderline, and temporarily occupied hromadas, where the (De)Centralisation? study found the largest gaps in interaction between levels of government.

Potential solutions:

Establishment of coordination and capacity building bodies for local authorities with the help of donors, following the example of the Recovery and Development Offices, in cooperation with international partners funded by the European Union, the Government of Sweden and the United Nations Development Program.

Hromada:

10 Recovery and Development Offices in 4 regions. **Four** operate at the **regional level** in **Kharkiv**, **Mykolaiv**, **and two in Dnipro**, supporting the administrations of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and **six more at the hromada level in Sumy, Nizhyn** (Chernihiv oblast), **Mykolaiv**, **Pervomaisk** (Kharkiv oblast), **Kamianske** (Dnipro oblast) and **Voznesensk** (Mykolaiv oblast).

Source:

https://www.eeas.europa.eu//delegations/ukraine/єс-швеція-та-undp-відкрили-10-офісів-відновлення-та-розвитку-для-підтримки-сталої-повоєнної_uk?s-232

What the practice is about:

Using the existing "Recovery and Development Offices supported by the European Union, the Government of Sweden and the United Nations Development Program" as communication platforms for coordinating the work of different levels of local authorities and coordinated citizen engagement.

The work of recovery and development offices to improve communication can provide an **unbiased platform for discussion where all levels of government have equal**

opportunities to communicate. This allows them to avoid the influence of internal political interests and focus on the real needs of hromadas. In addition, **offices such as the communication platform take over the organisation of discussion processes, which relieves the burden on local authorities and provides a more structured approach to coordinating actions.** For example, for frontline hromadas, where coordination between different levels of government has often been chaotic, these offices can become important centres for advocacy.

Робота Офісів відновлення та розвитку над питанням покращення комунікації може забезпечити **незаангажований майданчик для обговорень, де всі рівні влади мають рівні можливості для комунікації.** Це дозволяє уникати впливу внутрішніх політичних інтересів і фокусуватися на реальних потребах громад. Крім того, такі **офіси, як комунікаційний майданчик, беруть на себе організацію процесів обговорень, що знімає навантаження з ОМС і забезпечує більш структурований підхід до координації дій**. Наприклад, для прифронтових громад, де координація між різними рівнями влади часто була хаотичною, ці офіси можуть стати важливими центрами адвокації своїх проблем.

Bureaucratic overburdening and shortage of specialists

Local authority staff have to deal with numerous reports and requests from regional military administration and district military administrations, which are frequently duplicated. The bureaucratic requirements overwhelm them, delaying decision-making and limiting their efficiency. This diverts staff from core tasks to formal procedures, which consumes significant time and human resources and reduces productivity.

This is compounded by a **shortage of specialists at the level of local** and **regional authorities**. The lack of a sufficient number of qualified staff makes it much more difficult to perform key functions, especially in **crisis conditions**. Many leaders of local authorities note that to ensure the proper functioning of the administrative apparatus, **they have to hire additional assistants at their own expense or expand their staff. This is to keep up with all the requests from regional and district military administrations**.

> "
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> *At the request of the Department of Education, you received information on the composition. For example, demographics, yes, well, take it to manage with civil cases, but not for the health department. These are constant requests — hromadas are "howling", to be honest, because all they do are tables for yesterday's report tables, then tables for today's report, then tables for tomorrow, and they feel very pressured in this way.*
>
> Quotation from the KSE Institute study *"(De)Centralisation? Trends In The Interaction Of Local Self-Government And State Authorities"*

The difficulty of recruiting professionals, such as **project managers or grant specialists**, is **particularly acute in hromadas**. In particular, it isn't easy to find specialists **proficient in English, which is crucial for successful cooperation with international partners and donor organisations**. Local governments cannot compete with the salaries offered by international and humanitarian organisations that actively attract these specialists by offering market-based and more stable working conditions. As a result, qualified staff prefer more lucrative and stable jobs, severely limiting the human resource potential of local authorities.

Low staff motivation **due to insufficient salaries** is seen as a **priority** among the problems faced by local authorities (more than **76% of respondents** consider it so, according to a study by DESPRO with the support of the USAID HOVERLA Project in 2023). This data further confirms the scale of the issue.

Particular difficulties arise in **small hromadas**, which, unlike regional centres, cannot offer decent living and working conditions. Many professionals prefer big cities or stable jobs with competitive salaries, making the shortage of staff even more acute in these hromadas.

The situation with staffing is most critical in **frontline hromadas**, where, in addition to all the issues mentioned above, there is a massive outflow of personnel due to **security risks**. In these communities, local military administrations are often established with new leadership but face difficulties in recruiting staff. The new administrations find it difficult to attract both local staff and new specialists from other regions due to insecurity, limited resources and low salaries, which generally exacerbates the staff shortages in the most threatened areas.

Potential solutions:

1. The possibility of paying an additional supplement to the salaries of state and local authority officials for the additional workload associated with the performance of duties under international technical assistance and cross-border cooperation programmes and projects. It is important to adopt the draft law no. 10284, which provides for the alignment of the official's salary with incentive payments from budget support, assistance, and grants from the European Union, foreign governments, international organisations and donor agencies.

2. Involvement of youth in internships and further work in local authorities and municipal institutions of the hromada. On the Diia.Osvita resource, representatives of local authorities can find the educational series "Organisation of internships for youth in public authorities" or a document from the United Nations Development Programme on the methodology of internships.

3. In many frontline hromadas, there is a shortage of professionals capable of managing infrastructure reconstruction or providing social services. Donor programmes, such as the aforementioned "Recovery and Development Offices", can provide local officials with the necessary knowledge and expert support to significantly improve their performance. Also, support from international partners in developing digital platforms for communicating with citizens can further streamline bureaucratic processes, reduce workloads and staff, and speed up decision-making.

4. Establishing effective communication between all levels of government, developing unified strategies for engagement, and strengthening the human resource capacity of local authorities are key steps that can not only improve the quality of governance. They can also restore citizens' trust in participating in public processes. Some recommendations can be found in our analysis.

01

CHALLENGE 1.
LOW TRUST

Residents are reluctant to get engaged as they do not trust the authorities

Citizens' trust in each other and in local authorities is becoming increasingly important in the context of existential warfare. Without such trust, the possibility of cooperation between different actors is compromised, since trust and cooperation are essential features of a modern functioning state.

Low levels of trust can undermine the stability and legitimacy of local institutions, signalling deeper structural problems that require reforms to restore public confidence (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1995; Kaase and Newton, 1995). Low trust can also create favourable conditions for the emergence of populist or anti-systemic forces that exploit public discontent (Dalton, 2004; Arzheimer, 2009). Individually, citizens who distrust local authorities may either support democratic reforms to increase accountability and transparency (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Dalton, 2004) or be less likely to comply with local laws and regulations (Marien and Hooghe, 2011). The KSE Institute's research shows that the approval of the city authorities in Ukrainian hromadas is influenced by **the perception of hromada's resilience**, **the level of satisfaction with public services, and the ability of the authorities to respond to crises.**

Why do people distrust the authorities? The most widely discussed in the academic literature is the dependence of trust on the **quality of service delivery** (*Van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003, Van Ryzin, 2013, Gustavsen et al, 2017*), **accountability and opportunities for engagement** (*Jennings, 1998, Putnam, 2000, Sibers et al, 2018, Jennings & Stoker, 2004*), **ideological and political characteristics of the government** (*Christensen et al., 2020*), citizen awareness *(Grimmelikhuijsen, 2010),* and **the demographic structure of the community population** (*Christensen and Lægreid 2009*).

In this chapter, we briefly analyse some of these reasons for distrust and the solutions already in place in Ukrainian hromadas that can potentially mitigate these negative effects.

Solution 1.1: Transparency of local authorities in their activities and results for hromada

The fact that people often do not understand the limits of local authorities' powers and the results of their activities is one of the aspects that causes distrust. This problem is not unique to local authorities, as people do not always seek out the information that is already available about the activities of their executive body. Local authorities can help to address it by being open about their activities. This requires allocating additional resources to the communications department, talking about activities that are not openly visible, communicating key messages and inviting the community to engage in dialogue through feedback mechanisms.

Available solutions:

Informal regular public reporting on the current and future activities of the local council by the chairman to hromada

Hromada:

Shyroke, Zaporizhzhia region

Source:

Speech at the KSE event

What the practice is about:

In this regard, the head hromada of Shyroke shared their own experience in dealing with this issue by introducing the practice of public reports by the head of hromada. These reports are presented in each major settlement of hromada at a time convenient for the residents and in the open air. Such events are very popular because of their informal nature. In addition, the head of hromada holds a monthly live broadcast where they answer questions from residents and talk about hromada activities and plans for the coming months.

Available solutions:

A multifunctional communication platform for building a dialogue between the authorities and hromada

Public spaces have proved to be an important **indicator of the ability of local authorities to engage with a wider range of stakeholders**, particularly in the **integration of IDPs.** However, maintaining cooperation between local authorities and hromadas has become increasingly difficult in times of war. **The displacement of citizens and the depletion of civil society and local authority staff make active and inclusive participation difficult, while the prolonged state of emergency increases the risk of local political conflict and pressure from interest groups.** On the positive side, fewer local authorities report misuse of participatory processes for private gain, suggesting that communities are self-regulating to maintain democratic accountability despite attempts to undermine it.

Hromada:

Kyiv, Kyiv region

Source:

https://vcentri.com/us/

What the practice is about:

VCENTRI Hub is a multifunctional space in three districts of Kyiv that regularly hosts public reports of local authorities and training in participatory mechanisms for effective interaction with the authorities.

District public spaces host urban policy debates, public consultations and other public events in direct cooperation with local authorities. It also serves as an educational hub, encouraging active citizens to engage in the implementation and monitoring of urban policies through training in dialogue skills and participation mechanisms for effective interaction.

For example, in Obolon and Shevchenkivskyi districts alone, more than 1,431 events were held in 2023, of which about a third were for IDPs. There are also regular events for children and young people, training for the elderly, various events for civil society and civil servants, meetings and roundtables, presentations, consultations, and creative evenings. A useful tool for engagement is the module (online platform) for launching public consultations in the centres (more on this practice in section 4.2).

Solution 1.2: Creation of a positive participation experience

Motivation is a fragile value, especially when there is distrust between local authorities and hromada residents and vice versa. The KSE research respondents repeatedly pointed to negative experiences of cooperation with local authorities, unfulfilled promises, etc., which only deepened distrust, reinforced the belief that institutions are indifferent, and killed the motivation of active citizens to continue to engage and cooperate.

Here, trust can be rebuilt by initiating cooperation. Such cooperation will send a signal that the authorities are ready to respond positively to the suggestions of active residents and to implement the results of participation.

Given that most large projects take a long time between consultation with citizens and implementation, it makes sense to try micro-projects to rebuild trust. They are easier to manage and, unlike large projects, allow community members to see the results of their participation more quickly. They are a starting point for moving on to larger initiatives, gradually building trust and community engagement. For example, we are talking about community clean-ups (*toloka*) or tactical urbanism, where small efforts can change the community environment for the better.

Available solutions:

Free practical workshops on tactical urbanism for the community improve public space and create a sense of social value

Hromada:

Chernihiv, Chernihiv region

Source:

https://www.instagram.com/eco_misto/p/C-NOhHZN0CA/

What the practice is about:

The Chernihiv-based NGO Eco Misto organised free workshops for all hromada members to learn how to use hand and power tools to create small architectural forms out of wood and old pallets. Tactical urbanism is a global approach to improving urban space quickly and cheaply. Most valuable of all is the sense of ownership of these improvements by the citizens themselves.

Communication campaigns on successful examples of citizen, public sector and business engagement in their own and other communities, participation in thematic civil society forums, or joint exchange visits to other communities and vice versa can also have an impact.

02

CHALLENGE 2.
LACK OF PARTICIPATION TOOLS OR KNOWLEDGE OF THEM

Residents want to get involved, but they do not know how to do it

There are participation tools in Ukraine that can be used during martial law. However, the use of some local democracy tools may be complicated or temporarily restricted. For example, local elections and local referendums are not possible during martial law.

The use of other tools depends on security conditions, technical feasibility and the availability of the necessary procedures in the statutes of territorial communities or in the relevant provisions adopted by local councils. For example, electronic petitions, remote public hearings, and general meetings with the permission of the military command — all these tools can be used if there is technical and security feasibility (Council of Europe Office in Ukraine, 2023).

Another problem identified by participants during the discussion was the lack of awareness of opportunities for participation. This is due to two main factors: **a lack of civic engagement skills among residents and a lack of communication from local authorities about participation opportunities**.

Solution 2.1: Developing civic engagement skills among residents

A local authority can stimulate the development of civic skills through the active engagement of residents and the integration of new groups. To do this, it is important to create conditions that facilitate the development of a proactive attitude, even among those who are still on the margins of public life. Partnership with experienced civil society organisations is particularly critical in this context. By working with such organisations, local authorities can tap into expertise and resources that can help build trust. International technical assistance is also a powerful tool, helping to build the capacity of communities and providing additional opportunities for training and development.

Available solutions:

Specialised educational trainings contribute to the creation of new knowledge and increases the competence, motivation, and awareness of citizens

Hromada:

Prysyvaska, Kherson region, and Horokhiv, Volyn region

Source:

https://gorokhivrada.gov.ua/news/1727164475/,https://grygorivska-gromada.gov.ua/news/1644500517/

What the practice is about:

Prysyvaska rural hromada in Kakhovka district held a thematic training for local entrepreneurs and representatives of the local government in order to establish a Hromada-Business-Government dialogue and create conditions for rapid and sustainable development of entrepreneurship in the community. Such initiatives have a high practical result in the form of elaborated plans for future business development, and also provide an understanding that it is possible and necessary to work together, as everyone is a beneficiary of change.

A youth training was held in Horokhiv hromada to engage young people from rural areas of hromada in decision-making for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of their hromada. By giving young people with an understanding of the problems and tools to solve them, it will encourage their involvement in the future.

A platform similar to the aforementioned VCENTRI Hub could introduce civic education weekends, hold various forums, provide free legal advice, help improve legal education, develop the practices of an active citizen and certainly make an educational contribution to the community.

Solution 2.2: Proactive communication by local authorities on forms and tools of participation

Proactive communication with hromada is the basis for effective bilateral interaction. Participation tools are key in this context, as they transform this interaction into a partnership. However, in the current environment, when there are certain restrictions on mass citizen engagement, the tools are limited. Local authorities should prioritise and use possible and safe engagement tools and proactively communicate them to hromada.

Available solutions:

A clear list of forms of engagement in the public charter provides citizens with an understanding of the opportunities and guarantees of access to decision-making

Hromada:

Lutsk, Volyn region

Source:

https://www.lutskrada.gov.ua/pages/stattia-31

What the practice is about:

However, the experience of hromada of Lutsk shows that even with limited opportunities, the public can be involved. By adopting a new charter in 2023, Lutsk hromada updated the list of forms of citizen engagement.

Hromada reorganised its advisory bodies. The mechanisms of public hearings have been actively used during the war, although this process remains difficult due to the need to ensure the safety of citizens. However, they widely use electronic consultations, including the discussion of the Comprehensive spatial development plan on the e-democracy website.

Hromada also conducts surveys of its citizens, asking for their opinions on important issues such as the feasibility of rebuilding the town's central highway. Participatory budgeting has been in place since 2007, and grew out of local initiatives.

Lutsk hromada has established several advisory groups, with the latest one dealing with requests from military units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. This group includes representatives of the military, civil society and local authority leadership. The renewed youth council has developed a programme to promote volunteering and held its first volunteer forum.

Available solutions:

Prayer breakfasts

Hromada:

Shyroke, Zaporizhzhia region

Source:

Speech at the KSE event

What the practice is about:

Prayer breakfasts are held on the first Friday of every month in Shyroke hromada. This practice, adopted from the US, aims to bring together representatives of completely different denominations to read the Bible and socialise. It has proved effective in bringing hromada together and reducing levels of religious discrimination and intolerance. Prayer breakfasts have become a good way of preventing the spread of hate speech in the community and have increased the level of trust between residents.

CHALLENGE 3.
THE "POLITICISATION"
OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is perceived as a purely "political" process in a negative sense

There are peculiarities of the local political context. If local civil society organisations and initiatives choose criticism as their main form of advocacy, without offering effective solutions, local authorities may perceive them with hostility (even if the criticism is justified) and the interaction may escalate into conflict. Conflict is an emotional phenomenon that distances the public and local authorities from constructive dialogue and leads to a degree of closure and disengagement on the part of local authorities.

Yet, this perception is often incorrect and destructive in nature. In this chapter, we therefore present an example of how to deal with the "politicisation" of public participation.

Solution 3: Inclusive approach to decision-making

Some participants spoke of artificial barriers that hinder interaction between civil society and the authorities. Some local authorities only work with a limited range of organisations, giving the impression that they only involve their "own" people in addressing the real needs of the community. Such barriers undermine trust in local authorities and have a negative impact on civic engagement.

Available solutions:

Coordinating key infrastructure projects with the involvement of hromada residents

Hromada:

Makariv, Kyiv region

Source:

Speech at the KSE event

What the practice is about:

The case of Makariv rural hromada and its experience of involving different groups in decision-making is quite the opposite and therefore relevant. Moreover, this policy was quite deliberate. In addition to the pro-local authority section of the population, **the opposition was also involved in the discussions**, along with activists who usually disagreed with the policies of the current council. **The opposition accepted its responsibilities** and became a collaborator in the project, **which reduced unconstructive criticism as the opposition also became a stakeholder in the process.** This involvement gave activists an understanding of the internal complexities of the processes that they could not see from the outside. As a result of these decisions, the interaction between local authorities and the public is now based on partnership. Representatives of Makariv hromada point out that such cooperation has helped the local authorities to better understand their community and vice versa. In addition, an **informal development council of hromada** has been formed, which allows immediate feedback on a project, even **via messenger**.

Hromada also practices community clean-ups (*toloka*), where groups with often **conflicting interests** are invited to participate. However, they work together because they understand that the ultimate beneficiary is the entire hromada. Some time ago, local authority representatives were not very aware of how citizen participation tools worked and did not make much use of them. However, **inviting independent civil society organisations to moderate focus groups with the opposition and training local authorities in this area has changed the situation.**

04

CHALLENGE 4. ORGANISING SECURITY MEASURES FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Citizen engagement is limited due to the war

Physical security is the biggest obstacle to citizen engagement in community decision-making. There may be good reasons for this: in particular, in many frontline hromadas, regular shelling makes it virtually impossible or very difficult to organise traditional public events, public hearings or meetings, which are usually the basis for active participation by residents in decision-making. However, the situation is also sometimes used as a pretext to reduce the transparency of local authorities, although this is not always justified.

However, as TI Ukraine's Research on the state of transparency in cities under martial law shows, the dilemma between security and engagement is false: even frontline hromadas find alternative ways of being transparent and engaged.

Security and active citizen participation are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually supportive. Openness to the public and a transparent decision-making process build trust in state institutions, which is an important element of state stability in times of war. Engaged residents can better understand the constraints and challenges facing the authorities and offer their resources and ideas to improve security and social measures (Keudel & Huss, 2024).

As there are no elections in Ukraine during the war, this is particularly critical. When citizens are unable to influence the political system through the electoral process, they need other channels to express their opinions and influence decision-making. Participation in local government gives them that voice and helps uphold democratic principles.

Solution 4.1: Seeking additional sources of funding

Martial law has severely limited the resources of hromadas, both in material and human terms. As a result of ongoing security threats and economic hardship, hromadas face a lack of funding for infrastructure development and maintenance initiatives. Military needs and protection from shelling often take precedence, leaving less room for investment in civic engagement. In addition, much of the infrastructure for public gatherings and interaction may be destroyed or damaged. Public spaces where meetings, hearings or other events would normally take place may be destroyed by hostilities or forced to be converted into shelters.

Available solutions:

Attracting external funding through grant programmes to ensure safety in hromada

Hromada:

Novopokrovsk, Kharkiv region

Source:

https://dream.gov.ua/ua/project/DREAM-UA-260224-24C2603D/profile

What the practice is about:

Responding to the challenges posed by the martial law, Novopokrovsk hromada chose to create a safe space for residents to unite — a community development centre in the shelter of the local cultural centre. Given the urgent need for security, this space will serve both as a shelter from shelling and as a centre for active social life. The community seeks to engage various social groups, especially young people, women, people with disabilities and people with challenging living conditions. The initiative also provides new learning opportunities — the residents are going to be taught how to develop and implement grant projects, the basics of entrepreneurship and project management.

Solution 4.2: Enhancing electronic engagement formats

Security restrictions make it much more difficult for citizens to participate in decision-making processes. As hromads become closer to the war zone, it becomes more difficult to implement local democracy mechanisms due to constant security threats. Hromadas in safer environments can develop and improve engagement mechanisms that can be used by other communities once the situation stabilises. However, even in these communities, offline events may not be possible due to a lack of quality accommodation and safe spaces.

Available solutions:

Implementing the digital service "E-Ternopil: Resident's Portal" digital service to develop e-democracy and ensure safe participation of citizens in decision-making processes.

Hromada:

Ternopil, Ternopil region

Source:

https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-regions/3906377-u-ternopoli-za-kosti-radi-evropi-rozrobili-novij-eservis-dla-mistan.html

What the practice is about:

Security restrictions can be reduced with the help of digital e-democracy tools. In Ternopil, a digital service "E-Ternopil: Resident's Portal" was developed as part of the Council of Europe-funded project "Local Initiatives for Open Governance and Human Rights at the Local Level in Ukraine".

This portal allows residents to receive services, participate in surveys and discussions, and submit requests online, reducing the need for physical meetings and security risks. This tool allows citizens to remain actively involved in decision-making processes even under martial law. "E-Ternopil: Resident Portal" creates an effective and secure mechanism for participation, providing convenient access to services and interactive interaction with local authorities.

Solution 4.3: Digital security training

In addition to physical security, there is also the issue of digital security. Despite having access to many sources of information about the activities of local authorities, many residents prefer unreliable sources, making them vulnerable to misinformation. As a result, their understanding of the actions and decisions of local authorities is distorted and their trust in them undermined. Disinformation in the digital space is becoming a serious threat to effective communication and citizen participation in decision-making**.**

Available solutions:

Trainings on countering disinformation and strategic communications for state officials in hromadas

Hromada:

Hromadas of Chernihiv and Sumy regions

Source:

https://cg.gov.ua/index.php?id=500091&tp=page

What the practice is about:

Three-day training for state officials from the Chernihiv and Sumy regions on countering disinformation and strategic communication focused on increasing the information resilience of hromadas. Participants learned how to identify fakes, use information verification tools, create counter-narratives and develop crisis communication plans. The training covered both theoretical aspects of strategic communication and practical skills aimed at reducing the impact of hostile disinformation in the regions.

CHALLENGE 5. CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE AND MAKE-UP OF POPULATION

Changes in the structure of the population make the usual practices of engagement irrelevant

Since the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has increased dramatically. As of October 2024, according to the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine, there were **approximately 4.6 million** officially registered **IDPs**. Of these, 59.9% are women (2,782,325) and 40.1% are men (1,864,410). About 906,000 children are also registered as IDPs.

This is a significant increase compared to the previous waves of displacement that began in 2014 following Russia's invasion of Crimea and the east of Ukraine. According to a report by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the main needs of IDPs in Ukraine in 2024 remain unchanged: access to housing, healthcare and employment. In addition, a significant number of IDPs stress the need for financial assistance to meet basic needs such as food and necessities. IDPs often face integration difficulties, including a lack of employment and stable housing, which hinders their social integration. Psychological support is also crucial for IDPs who have experienced traumatic events.

At the same time as the number of IDPs is increasing, the number of military personnel and veterans is growing due to active hostilities. According to the Ministry of Defence, **the number of combatants had risen to 1.3 million by July 2024,** and this number is still growing. They also include veterans, as the current legislation does not have a clear definition of this category of people, so it needs to be updated: it should be reserved for those military personnel who have fulfilled their duty and gained combat experience (regardless of the length of service). The key needs of Ukrainian veterans are access to quality medical care, rehabilitation, psychological support, and social adaptation. Integration into civilian life, in particular through employment, education and family support programmes, plays an important role.

Solution 5.1: Developing channels for IDP engagement

Hromadas have played a key role in addressing issues related to shelter and the provision of necessary resources to IDPs. Local authorities have struggled to keep track of IDPs due to the heavy workload of social services and limited access to statistical data. In addition to basic services, the issue of IDP integration, including employment, has become a challenge. The lack of employment in hromada is a major factor encouraging IDPs to continue migrating and shortening their stay in hromada. There is also a shortage of specialists in those hromadas whose residents are leaving en masse due to the security situation.

Available solutions:

The IDP integration programme

Hromada:

Hromada in Kharkiv region (anonymous interviews)

Source:

https://centreua.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Gromady_voyennogo_chasu_veb.pdf

What the practice is about:

A hromada in the Kharkiv region faced an acute healthcare staffing issue after the start of the full-scale invasion. Many doctors and medical staff left due to security risks. The local authorities have addressed this issue by employing IDP professionals, and providing them and their families with social housing and lump-sum payments. Moreover, the integration of IDPs is a priority for the local council, as they register new PEs (private entrepreneurs) and relocate their businesses. The local authority also actively engages local youth who have returned to the community from Kharkiv to work in the local council itself.

Available solutions:

Councils dealing with IDPs at local authorities

Hromada:

750 hromadas participating in the project established IDP councils

Source:

https://yednanniazaradydii.org.ua/en/about-project/
https://sss-ua.org/karta-rad-vpo/?cn-reloaded=1

What the practice is about:

The establishment of IDP councils began in 2018. As of December 2023, there are more than 750 councils at three different levels: hromada, district, and region. The main problems that IDP councils help to solve are: reissue of lost documents and access to social benefits, difficulties in integrating into a new environment, psychological assistance, as well as finding housing and employment. The councils allow IDPs to actively participate in solving their own issues, promote accountability and ensure that they are seen not only as beneficiaries but also as full-fledged members of the community. Local authorities that are aware of the specific needs and perspectives of IDPs can make more effective decisions, avoid wasting resources, and meet the needs of the groups in need.

The institutionalisation of IDP councils as part of the State Policy Strategy on Internal Displacement until 2025 underlines their importance at the national policy level. Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 812 of 4 August 2023 "On Approval of the Model Regulation on the Council for Internally Displaced Persons" defines the role of the councils, encourages local and regional authorities to establish them, and sets out clear guidelines for their work. This represents a shift towards a more inclusive model of governance, where IDPs have the opportunity to influence local policies and contribute to the development of host communities. The councils have not only filled critical gaps in support for displaced population, but have also promoted participatory democracy by involving IDPs in local decision-making processes. This approach has been supported by international organisations such as UNHCR and demonstrates Ukraine's commitment to innovative, scalable solutions to managing internal migration.

Solution 5.2: Facilitation of dialogue with the military, veterans, and their families in hromada

Following the full-scale invasion, the number of residents in each hromada who were involved with the army increased significantly. Active military personnel, veterans, and their families require special attention in terms of adapting to new conditions. The situation poses challenges for local authorities, including the need to develop and implement social support programmes that take into account the specific needs of military personnel and veterans. Also, to ensure access to quality medical and psychological services.

A separate issue is the need to improve physical infrastructure to ensure an inclusive environment adapted to the needs of people with reduced mobility, including veterans with injuries or disabilities. This requires additional financial and human resources, as well as close cooperation with government and civil society organisations for the effective implementation of support programmes.

Available solutions:

Establishment of a Veteran's hut (kurin)

Hromada:

Makariv, Kyiv region

Source:

https://www.nashe.place/post/predstavlyaiemo-koncepciyu-veteranskogo-prostoru-v-makarovi
https://spaceod-arch.com/embankment-in-makariv

What the practice is about:

As part of the "Our Place" project, which focused on revitalising public spaces that were abandoned or damaged as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war, representatives of the Makariv rural hromada created a special space. It was the space where the servicemen could communicate and receive support from their companions-in-arms. In March 2024, the project team had a discussion and came up with the idea of setting up a kurin, a space that could be built quickly and easily from cheap local materials. The hut allows servicemen and their families to organise thematic meetings, relax with their loved ones, and recover in nature. The local government is expected to facilitate the creation of the Veterans' hut by allocating land and connecting it to existing infrastructure, finding materials for the space and grant opportunities for its further support.

Available solutions:

Creating a hub to support families of the military personnel

Hromada:

Bucha, Kyiv region

Source:

https://www.facebook.com/PlastUACenter/posts/pfbid0WfBNaMdMiemM75apfyftqrEas
GhUcca6SXmUMrxatz2b9YvAyz2R2aArcako3LZNl

What the practice is about:

In 2024, the "Plast Training Centre", a municipal institution of the Kyiv Regional Council, opened a hub for supporting military families. Its purpose is to create a safe space to provide psychological, legal and emotional support to the families of defenders. The Hub organises activities for parents and children, such as training on practical stress management tips and a workshop on making anti-stress toys. Municipalities can establish such hubs based on their municipal institutions with the help of NGOs, professionals, and volunteers. These hubs will help local authorities to tailor social programmes to the real needs of families and provide them with individual support.

CONCLUSIONS

Citizen engagement, despite the challenges of martial law, remains important for the development and resilience of hromadas. Hromadas that **actively engage different social groups and partners** are better <u>able to cope with</u> war-related <u>crises</u>. Engagement and trust are indeed closely linked, as shown in academic research (Rapp, <u>2020</u>, Sibers, <u>2018</u>). But this relationship **is not only positive — engagement with a lack of results or negative experiences reduces** public **trust** (*Gaventa & Barrett, 2012; Halvorsen, 2003; Lowndes et al., 2001; Sant & Davies, 2018*). Therefore, in order to get a positive effect from engagement, it is necessary to **effectively** involve citizens in **real decision-making** and **provide feedback on changes** after engagement.

However, effective participation requires close coordination between all levels of government. Currently, interaction between hromada, district and region authorities is often complicated, which **delays responses to people's needs**. Hromadas can overcome these barriers by establishing joint development offices with the support of international partners to ensure sustainable coordination and information sharing.

Hromadas also face an acute **shortage of staff and resources**. The problem is more critical in small and frontline hromadas, where there is a significant outflow of personnel due to security risks. Attracting international assistance to increase salaries and motivate staff, as well as active internship programmes for young people, can help to renew the team of specialists. Finally, automation of processes and digital platforms for communication with residents simplify management, increasing transparency and speed of decisions.

The main challenges to citizen engagement are **low trust in the government, lack of awareness of opportunities for participation, and "politicization" of public participation.** Also, **security restrictions during the war and changes in the population structure** make the usual practices less effective.

Establishing regular public reports and using **informal communication platforms**, such as hubs, to facilitate a two-way dialogue between the authorities and the community is important to rebuild trust. In addition, it is worth organising micro-projects that quickly bring visible results and increase the trust of residents. Educational activities that teach residents about participatory mechanisms, develop civic engagement skills, and increase motivation to cooperate also play a significant role.

Although such mechanisms are energy and resource intensive and may be seen as "at the wrong time" during war, they have the potential to be a channel of meaningful communication between the government and the community. They also allow the community to communicate with each other. The existence of such channels creates the possibility of preventing or mitigating conflicts that will cost the hromada more in the long run.

Hromadas face limited opportunities for citizen engagement in times of war and a lack of information about available tools. Building public participation skills, including thematic trainings for different groups, such as youth or entrepreneurs, can help overcome this challenge. Such events create an understanding of the mechanisms of engagement and stimulate activity. Another way is **for local authorities to proactively communicate the available forms**

of participation. Doing so allows residents to be better informed about the possibilities and guarantees access to decision-making.

The politicisation of engagement in hromadas often hinders constructive dialogue, as civil society organisations and activists are perceived as hostile by local authorities. As a result, the authorities become more closed and create additional barriers to cooperation. However, the experience of Makariv hromada shows that an inclusive approach that helps to engage both supporters and opponents in discussions can help build trust and partnerships. Removing artificial barriers and **working with independent moderators** is important **, involving residents in all critical decisions** — from infrastructure projects to regular discussions of hromada development.

Security in wartime typically limits opportunities for public participation, especially in frontline regions where the threat of shelling makes public gatherings dangerous. Recommendations for hromadas include creating **safe spaces for meetings**, developing digital services for **remote interaction**, and **training in countering disinformation** to ensure information resilience.

Significant changes in the structure of the population, including an increase in the number of internally displaced persons and veterans, require new approaches to integration and social support. It is essential to create conditions for IDPs to be involved in local life through employment programmes, social housing and IDP councils. **Special spaces and hubs that provide social and psychological services** should be developed to support the military and veterans, as was done in Makariv and Bucha. These initiatives promote social adaptation and strengthen communities by ensuring inclusiveness and social cohesion.

ANNEX 1
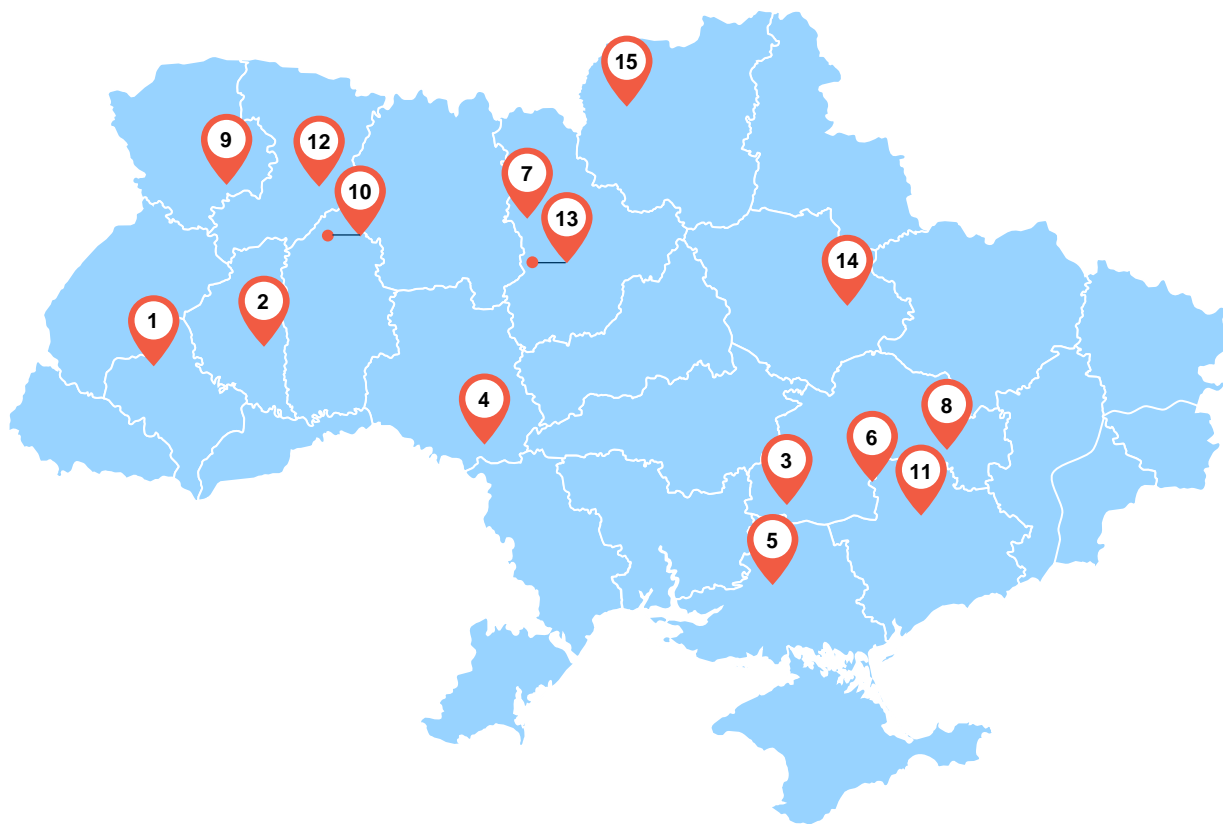
The list of hromadas whose local government representatives took part in the partnership event in August 2024:

1	Kalush urban territorial hromada
2	Zelenodolsk urban territorial hromada
3	Kopychyntsi urban territorial hromada
4	Kodyma urban territorial hromada
5	Beryslav urban territorial hromada
6	Shyroke rural territorial hromada
7	Makariv rural territorial hromada
8	Vasylkivska rural territorial hromada
9	Lutsk urban territorial hromada
10	Slavuta urban territorial hromada
11	Mykhaylivka rural territorial hromada
12	Hoshcha rural territorial hromada
13	Fastiv urban territorial hromada
14	Poltava urban territorial hromada
15	Chernihiv urban territorial hromada