Conflict and Civicness Research Group at LSE

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MAPPING UKRAINE'S DEMOCRATIC SPACE: PART 3

Civic activist perspectives on conditions in 40 localities

Analysing Data Collected in 2025

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The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep) is a research consortium led by the University of Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics in the 21st century.

PeaceRep's Ukraine programme

The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep) is a research consortium led by the University of Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics in the 21st century. PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is a multi-partner initiative that provides evidence, insight, academic research and policy analysis from Ukraine and the wider region to support Ukrainian sovereignty, territorial integrity and democracy in the face of the Russian invasion. PeaceRep's Ukraine programme is led by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) partnering with the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE) in Ukraine, the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Germany, the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM) in Austria and Jagiellonian University in Poland. Through our collaboration with KSE we work closely with researchers, educationalists and civic activists in Ukraine to ensure that policy solutions are grounded in robust evidence and are calibrated to support democratic outcomes.

Background

Mapping Ukraine's democratic space research project aims to provide granular insight into the evolution and impacts of the war on Ukraine in different local geographies. It also aspires to identify spheres and groups of people crucial for resilience. The research focuses on the following spheres: (a) economic wellbeing and access to social infrastructure; (b) security; (c) governance and civicness. The selection of these spheres and the concurrent adoption of a framework incorporating three distinct criteria are motivated by the recognition that the most significant transformations within Ukrainian society are manifesting within these specific domains. Such a strategic approach is designed to facilitate a nuanced understanding of the evolving dynamics and the far-reaching implications of the war within Ukraine, contributing to a thorough grasp of the multifaceted challenges and opportunities facing the society and activists.

About the Authors

The Authors are researchers of the Centre for Sociological Research, Decentralization and Regional Development of Kyiv School of Economics Institute. The Centre aims to provide high-quality academic and policy research in the topics of local governance, resilience, and development.

Website: https://kse.ua/kse-impact/center-for-sociological-research-decentralization-and-regional-development/

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Executive summary

This third report in the Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space series presents an in-depth assessment of the social, economic, and institutional conditions in 40 Ukrainian hromadas (territorial communities), based on surveys with 120 local activists and qualitative data collected in February 2025. Now entering the third year of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian communities face overlapping pressures from war, economic disruption, and institutional strain. Despite these challenges, this report reveals a civic landscape defined by adaptation, gradual recovery, and localized resilience.

Economic Recovery Amid Crisis

Economic stabilization is underway but uneven. Perceptions of job availability and income have improved since 2023, driven by infrastructure restoration, donor support, and government initiatives. Yet inflation, rising living costs, and high unemployment continue to suppress broader well-being. Access to basic infrastructure – including healthcare, education, and digital services – has significantly improved, particularly in urban centers. However, rural and frontline communities face persistent service gaps and infrastructure damage.

Local governments have actively contributed to recovery, focusing on repairing roads, supporting businesses, and attracting international assistance. Nonetheless, activists highlight frustration with opaque fiscal decisions and unequal aid distribution. Long-term recovery will require expanded access to social services, better budget transparency, and targeted support for vulnerable populations.

Security Under Pressure

While temporary gains in perceived safety were recorded in 2023, a renewed decline was observed by early 2025, reflecting intensified missile attacks and shelling, along with military escalation. Shelter infrastructure has improved but remains below acceptable standards. Missile strikes and shelling remain the dominant threats, driving persistent fear and disruption across communities. These immediate physical dangers are compounded by rising concern about cybercrime, internal displacement, and social fragmentation.

Social tensions, particularly between IDPs and local residents, continue to simmer beneath the surface. Cleavages based on religion, language, military service, and perceived inequality have become more visible. Though rarely explosive, these divisions can weaken social cohesion and trust. Structured dialogue mechanisms remain underutilized but are increasingly necessary to manage these evolving dynamics.

Governance, Participation, and Civic Engagement

Compared to the period before the full-scale invasion, this reporting wave reveals a significant shift towards decentralization of civic initiatives beyond urban centers, accompanied by a marked increase in fundraising efforts and volunteer engagement. Many previously inactive social groups – including older adults and rural populations – have mobilized to support military, humanitarian, and local development efforts.

Governance performance is viewed as stable but mixed. While ratings for local economic and infrastructure management have modestly improved, activists report a shift from visible emergency coordination to more routinized, less transparent cooperation. Most

activists (77%) report recent engagement with local authorities, yet satisfaction with this interaction has declined.

Formal participatory tools exist but remain symbolic or inactive in many communities. Informal channels, such as personal appeals and ad hoc coalitions, remain the dominant modes of civic influence. Trust issues persist: roughly one-third of activists report exclusion from decision-making, ineffective consultations, or barriers to dissent. Still, some positive cases of civic-government partnership – especially around local strategy-making and public services – illustrate potential for institutional innovation.

Importantly, perceptions of local corruption have improved. The share of activists who consider corruption "very common" dropped by half since early 2023, while those who say it is "not at all common" increased to over 33%. This shift likely reflects improved administrative procedures, stronger civic pressure, and a reframing of expectations under wartime constraints.

Decentralization and Polycentric Governance

Decentralization reform is under strain but remains intact. While no legal rollback has occurred, wartime fiscal centralization, the rise of military administrations, and limited autonomy in decision-making are widely felt. These trends raise concerns about long-term erosion of local self-governance.

Key mechanisms of polycentric governance[1] show varied strength. Resource mobilization (financial and human) is strong, driven by crisis response and civic initiative[2]. Facilitation of local knowledge and institutional innovation remain weaker, though promising practices are emerging, particularly in community planning, participatory hubs, and local policy development. The partial implementation of polycentric practices points to a critical opportunity for post-war democratic renewal.

The Civic Frontline: Activist Insights

Focus group participants and interviewees highlight the personal dimension of civic resilience. Despite burnout, funding cuts, and administrative inertia, activists continue to operate – driven by a strong internal commitment to community well-being. Informal networks, personal initiative, and improvisation remain key assets. Activists report both cooperation and obstruction from local authorities, emphasizing that outcomes often depend on individual relationships rather than institutional design.

Looking ahead, activists anticipate future crises but express confidence in their ability to adapt. Their resilience is not limitless, however, sustainability requires better institutional support, more equitable funding, and clear mechanisms for civic inclusion.

Key Takeaways

- Local governments have made measurable progress in restoring infrastructure and social services, but uneven recovery and financial strain persist.

[1] Polycentric governance refers to a system where multiple, overlapping decision-making centers operate independently yet interactively, allowing for cooperation and adaptation across different levels of government and civil society. This structure enhances problem-solving capacity and resilience in complex governance settings (*Ostrom, 2010*). See: Ostrom, E. (2010). *Polycentric systems for coping with collective action and global environmental change*. *Global Environmental Change*, 20(4), 550–557.

[2] These three mechanisms of polycentric governance are drawn from Keudel, O., & Huss, O. (2024). *Polycentric Governance in Crisis: Lessons from Ukraine*.

- Public safety perceptions have declined, reflecting intensifying missile and shelling threats. Civil-military coordination and local shelter investment remain urgent needs.
- Civic engagement remains vibrant but is increasingly shaped by informal processes and interpersonal trust. Formal participation tools are underused.
- Decentralization is under stress but has not been reversed. Strong local capacities for resource mobilization exist, but knowledge-sharing and innovation mechanisms require institutionalization.
- Activists continue to lead the civic response but face burnout, political pressures, and operational obstacles. Supporting their work is essential to long-term resilience.
- Localized social tensions persist but remain contained. Frictions between IDPs and locals, language and religious groups, and views on military service point to deeper divides.

Ukraine's democratic strength lies not only in national institutions but in its resilient hromadas. Empowering them through inclusive governance, reliable funding, and participatory reform will be vital for post-war recovery and democratic consolidation.

Introduction

Three years into Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian society continues to navigate profound challenges that test its social fabric, economic stability, and democratic institutions. In this protracted conflict, local communities and their governance structures have emerged as crucial arenas for resilience, adaptation, and the defense of democratic principles. Understanding the conditions within these communities, as perceived by those actively engaged on the ground, is essential for assessing Ukraine's trajectory and identifying needs for effective support. This report, the third in the "Mapping Ukraine's Democratic Space" series, offers insights into these dynamics based on recent data.

This report analyzes the evolving conditions in 40 diverse Ukrainian hromadas, drawing primarily on the perspectives of local civic activists surveyed in January-February 2025. It tracks changes in key areas compared to previous survey waves conducted in 2023, focusing on three core domains: economic well-being and access to social infrastructure; local security dynamics; and the state of governance and civicness. Significantly, this third wave analysis integrates fresh qualitative insights gathered through six in-depth interviews and a focus group with seven activists conducted in March 2025. This mixed-methods approach allows for a deeper exploration of sensitive topics, lived experiences, and the complex realities behind quantitative trends.

Methodologically, the report utilizes data from a standing panel of 120 local activists established in 2023. This key informant network enables reliable, context-rich monitoring of local conditions, overcoming challenges associated with representative sampling during wartime while providing granular insights. The survey data captures activist assessments of socio-economic conditions, security threats, local government performance, civic engagement barriers, and the perceived impacts of war on decentralization. The subsequent qualitative phase was designed specifically to probe sensitive issues like community tensions, operational challenges for activists, and adaptive strategies in greater depth, allowing for triangulation of findings.

The analysis proceeds by examining the core spheres of investigation identified in our research. It begins with an exploration of Economic Well-Being and Access to Social Infrastructure, analysing changes in perceptions of employment, income, and the availability and quality of essential public services. The report then delves into local Security dynamics, exploring shifts in perceived safety, the prioritization of different threats, civilian engagement with military preparedness, and the nature of social tensions within communities. Following this, the focus shifts to Governance and Civicness, assessing local government efficiency, cooperation patterns, barriers to civic participation,and ends with insights about Decentralization reform and Polycentric governance mechanisms in Ukraine (local capacities for resource mobilization, facilitating local knowledge and innovation). Integrated within this discussion are detailed findings from the qualitative focus group, offering deeper insights into activists' operational challenges, motivations, and future outlooks. The report culminates in a synthesis of key findings and discusses their implications for supporting resilience and democratic development in Ukraine's hromadas.

Methodology

Key informants network

A standing panel of 120 local activists provided regular data across 40 hromadas (territorial communities), enabling reliable and context-rich local monitoring during wartime.

The third wave of our survey was conducted through a network of 120 local activists from 40 hromadas, originally established in 2023 during the first wave. This model was adopted to overcome three key challenges: (a) the impracticality of representative sampling during full-scale war; (b) the need for granular insights into local conditions beyond the reach of large-n surveys; and (c) the value of combining qualitative depth with structured data collection across regions.

Our goal was to develop a local panel of informed community members able to assess socio-economic conditions, security, and governance practices on the ground. Participants were selected based on two criteria: sustained local presence (at least two to three years in the hromada, including one year before the invasion) and active involvement in civic, social, or volunteer initiatives. Screening included questions on occupation and ties to local civil society.

Changes to the Activist Panel

Changes to the panel ensured data quality and improved regional representation, with adjustments made after each wave due to migration, drop-out, or death.

Since the first wave, we revised 19% of the panel (23 informants), due to migration, changes in employment or local involvement, low response quality, and in some cases, death. We also replaced four hromadas to improve oblast-level coverage and ensure urban–rural diversity across the 22 included oblasts (Donetsk and Luhansk excluded due to security concerns). In the third wave, we updated the panel again, replacing 11 activists, mostly for the same reasons: relocation, non-response, or death.

Description of the Activist Sample

The third-wave panel includes 120 activists, skewed female and middle-aged, with deep ties to civic life.

The current sample includes 120 activists, 78 women and 42 men, with an average age of 44 (median: 41; range: 18-79). Most are volunteers or members of civic organizations (approximately 90), with over 30 leading local NGOs, many of which are small, community-based initiatives. A smaller share works in civic roles on a paid basis. Respondents are split evenly between occasional and consistently active volunteers.

Occupational Profile

The sample is dominated by education and NGO workers, reflecting strong civic infrastructure outside formal government.

Three-quarters of participants work in education or the civil society sector. Specifically, 38% are employed in education and science – primarily teachers, lecturers, and researchers – while 36% are active in NGOs and community organizations. Entrepreneurs

account for 8%, and public servants just 2%, indicating limited representation from formal local government. Another 15% selected "Other," mostly cultural and creative professionals.

Areas of Civic Engagement

Activists are engaged in wartime support, education, and community building, with a broad range of local initiatives.

The activists are involved in a wide range of community-focused activities, many directly related to wartime resilience. The most frequently mentioned areas include:

- Social support (55 mentions): assistance to people with disabilities, families, and psychological services
- Volunteering (33): especially support for the military (31) and IDPs (28)
- Community development (28)
- Educational projects (27)
- Youth initiatives (24)
- Humanitarian aid (25)
- Women's empowerment (16)
- Cultural projects (14)
- Legal aid (13), media/communications (8), environmental protection (6), sports (4), animal protection (4), and anti-corruption work (3)

Historical Civic Engagement

A third of activists took part in Ukraine's past civic uprisings, while younger activists signal generational renewal.

Responses reflect varied involvement in past civic mobilizations. Of 120 activists, 34 participated directly in the Orange Revolution (13 in Kyiv, 21 elsewhere), and 7 offered material support. Nearly half (48) did not participate, and 31 were too young at the time.

In the 2013-2014 Revolution of Dignity, participation was higher: 43 respondents took part (15 in Kyiv, 28 in other cities), and 12 supported the protests indirectly. Still, 52 did not participate, and 14 were too young. These patterns show a meaningful presence of historically engaged civic actors alongside a younger generation active in the current wartime context.

Integration of Qualitative Data Collection

To supplement the quantitative data gathered through the activist panel survey and gain deeper insights into complex and often sensitive areas, a qualitative phase was implemented in March 2025. This involved conducting semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion.

This mixed-methods approach was adopted specifically to explore the nuances of activists' experiences, particularly regarding operational challenges, interpersonal dynamics within the civic sector, interactions with authorities, and resilience strategies – topics where interactive discussion yields richer context than standardized questionnaires alone.

Integrating qualitative findings allows for triangulation and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the realities faced by activists on the ground.

Participants for the interviews and focus group were purposively selected from the pool of 120 survey respondents to ensure relevance to specific research themes. The six interviewees were chosen based on their survey responses highlighting experiences with potentially sensitive issues, such as conflicts between different community or civic groups.

For the focus group, seven activists were invited based on their documented experiences with significant operational challenges (e.g., funding, human resources, administrative hurdles). Efforts were made to maintain regional diversity within this qualitative sample; the focus group specifically included two participants from the West of Ukraine, two from the North, and three from the South. The focus group participants also represented diverse professional backgrounds (including teachers and lawyers), organizational affiliations (six from established NGOs, one from an informal initiative), and engagement levels (some contributing voluntarily alongside other employment). The focus group utilized a scenario-based discussion format, termed "Adaptive Resilience Scenarios," presenting hypothetical future challenges (funding loss, political change, security escalation) to probe strategic thinking, coping mechanisms, and perceived limits to continued activism.

Table 1. Involvement in Ukrainian Revolutions: Orange Revolution and Revolution of Dignity.

	Orange Revolution (2004)	Revolution of Dignity (2013–14)
Participated in Kyiv	13	15
Participated in other cities	21	28
Assisted protesters materially	7	12
Did not participate	48	52
Too young to participate	31	14

Table 2. Regional distribution of hromadas responses.

Oblast	Number of hromadas in oblast
Poltava	4
Cherkasy	2
Vinnytsia	1
Khmelnytskyi	1
Kropyvnytskyi	1
Center	
Dnipropetrovsk	3
Kharkiv	3
Zaporizhzhia	1
East	
Sumy	3
Chernihiv	2
Kyivska	1
Zhytomyr	1

Oblast	Number of hromadas in oblast
North	
Mykolaiv	2
Odesa	2
Kherson	1
South	
Ivano-Frankivsk	4
Volyn	3
Ternopil	2
Zakarpattia	1
Rivne	1
Lviv	1
West	

Table 3. Distribution of hromadas answers by hromada type.

Hromada Type	Number in survey	Share in survey	Share in Ukraine
Village / rural settlement	21	47%	28%
City	19	53%	72%

1. Economic Well-Being and Access to Social Infrastructure

War-related destruction, displacement, and budget shortfalls have deepened economic insecurity and strained social service delivery, especially in rural and frontline communities.

The war in Ukraine has significantly worsened economic instability and disrupted access to essential social services. The destruction of infrastructure, forced displacement of more than four million people, and economic downturn have intensified vulnerabilities, making it crucial to examine how economic well-being and social services function under these conditions (Ukrinform 2025; Anti-Crisis Media Center 2024).

Local governments are struggling to meet social needs. In 2023, 4.45 billion UAH in planned local social spending went unused, revealing financial constraints and ineffective budget planning (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2024). Furthermore, the war has exacerbated labor shortages, particularly in frontline and de-occupied areas, where social workers, psychologists, and medical personnel are in short supply (Radio Svoboda 2024).

Access to social services is particularly challenging in rural and conflict-affected areas. Limited transport, damaged facilities, and the absence of unified service centers make it difficult for vulnerable populations to receive support. Only 40% of service providers report having adequate resources; one-third rely on outdated or insufficient equipment (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine 2024). Rolling blackouts caused by attacks on the energy grid further disrupt service delivery.

Moreover, as Ukraine navigates the post-war recovery phase, it is essential to build an economic system that is more inclusive and resilient (Ekonomichna Pravda 2024). This requires not only the reconstruction of physical infrastructure but also the strengthening of social safety nets and the provision of services that support economic opportunities for all citizens, especially those in the most vulnerable situations (UNIAN 2024).

In conclusion, the importance of investigating **economic well-being and access to social infrastructure** in the context of war cannot be overemphasized. These factors are inextricably linked to the ability of individuals and communities to recover from crises and rebuild their lives. Given the current circumstances, understanding and addressing these issues is critical for ensuring that Ukraine's recovery is not only physical but also social and economic, with a focus on resilience, equity, and long-term stability.

While economic insecurity has strained households and budgets, these challenges are closely tied to how people access essential public services. The following section takes a closer look at changes in infrastructure and service delivery, shedding light on both areas of improvement and ongoing difficulties.

Access to Infrastructure and Services: General Improvement with Persistent Challenges

Access to infrastructure and public services has improved since 2023, but roads, transport, and utilities remain critical problem areas.

Between March 2023 and February 2025, perceptions of infrastructure access improved. However, challenges remain in several key areas, particularly road infrastructure, public transport, and utility services.

- **Roads and public transport remain major problem areas.** Reported road access problems dropped from 68% to 34%, and issues with public transport from 53% to 24%. Progress, while visible, is uneven and shaped by broader fiscal trade-offs. In 2022, the government cancelled a major road construction and improvement programme to prioritize the war effort, contributing to the overall decline in civilian procurement between 2022 and 2024, especially when adjusted for inflation (PeaceRep 2024).

  The improvement in road infrastructure can be attributed to the efforts of the State Agency for Restoration and Infrastructure Development, which carried out extensive reconstruction and major repairs of key roads in 2024 (State Agency for Restoration and Infrastructure Development of Ukraine 2024). Additionally, public transport accessibility improved due to the modernization of urban transit systems, supported by projects co-financed by the European Investment Bank (Ministry for Communities, Territories and Infrastructure Development of Ukraine 2024). Several cities, including Kyiv, Lviv, and Odesa, received new trams, while others upgraded their bus and trolleybus fleets, leading to a more reliable and efficient transportation network.

- **Electricity and utilities** show a mixed trend. Reported electricity problems fell from 56% in March 2023 to 18% in November, then rose to 27% by February 2025 - likely due to renewed attacks on the energy grid. Recent KIIS survey reflects similar challenges: 52% of respondents noted worsened access to household electricity and 36% for critical infrastructure (Council of Europe and Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2024). Over half of Ukraine's energy infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed (State Agency for Restoration and Infrastructure Development of Ukraine 2024).

- **Healthcare and education** access improved. Primary healthcare access issues fell from 24% to 15%; school and preschool concerns dropped from 58% to 14%. This trend aligns with the KIIS findings, where 33% of respondents reported worsening access to education, and 26% cited declining healthcare access (Council of Europe and Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2024). Emergency care access improved as well (from 25% to 12%).

  In 2024, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine reported that 4.6 million children were affected by school closures due to the war, with 1.2 million students relying on a combination of online and in-person learning (Global Partnership for Education 2025). As of January 9, 2025, the World Health Organization verified a total of 2,209 attacks on healthcare facilities in Ukraine since the conflict began, resulting in 205 deaths and 698 injuries among patients and healthcare workers (World Health Organization 2025). Notably, on July 8, 2024, Russian missile strikes targeted Ukraine's largest children's hospital, Okhmatdyt, resulting in multiple casualties (UNICEF 2024).

- **Communication and connectivity** have improved significantly. Phone service problems dropped from 47% to 18%, and internet issues from 46% to 12%. This trend corresponds with the KIIS survey findings, where more than half of respondents rated phone and internet access positively, reflecting effective stabilization of critical communication infrastructure (Council of Europe and Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2024).

- **Basic services** such as postal delivery, retail access, and social services saw marked improvement. Reported issues with postal services dropped from 17% in March 2023 to 7% in February 2025. The KIIS survey also noted relatively high satisfaction with administrative services (Council of Europe and Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2024).

  According to a recent survey by the National Agency on Corruption Prevention, Administrative Service Centers (ASCs) have demonstrated the highest level of transparency among institutions providing services to the public and businesses. This improvement is attributed to the Ministry of Digital Transformation's digitalization efforts, which have significantly reduced corruption instances within ASCs, with satisfaction rates reaching 94.9% (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2025a).

*Figure 1. Trends in access to infrastructure (March 2023 – February 2025): Share of Activists **Reporting Decline**.*

How has the ACCESSIBILITY (availability and accessibility) of the following infrastructure and public services in your community changed COMPARED TO THE LAST YEAR?

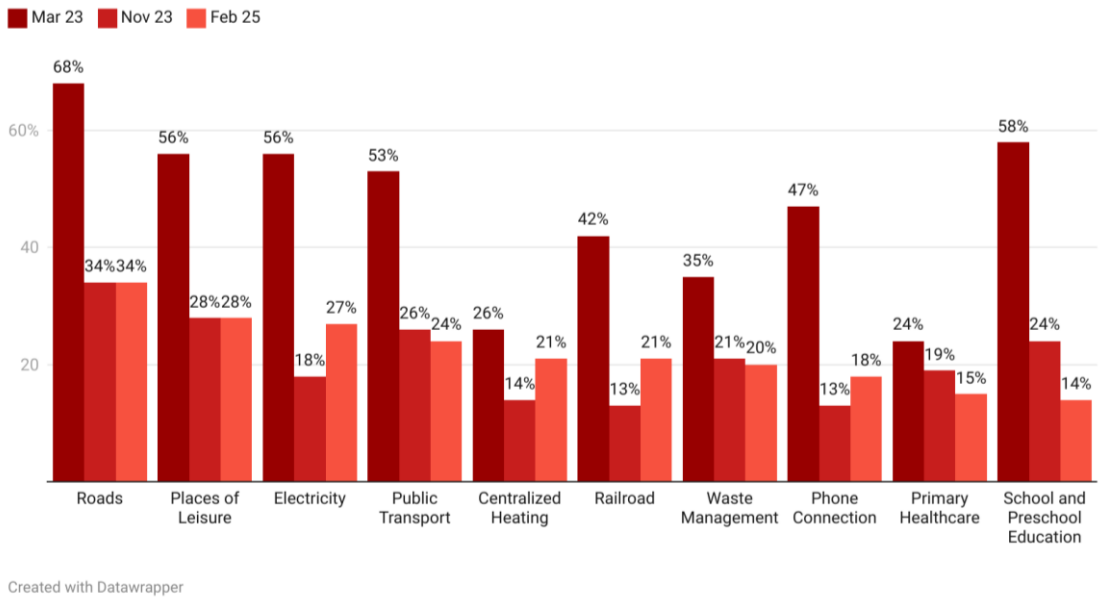


*Figure 2. Trends in access to infrastructure (March 2023 – February 2025): share of activists **reporting decline** (continuing).*

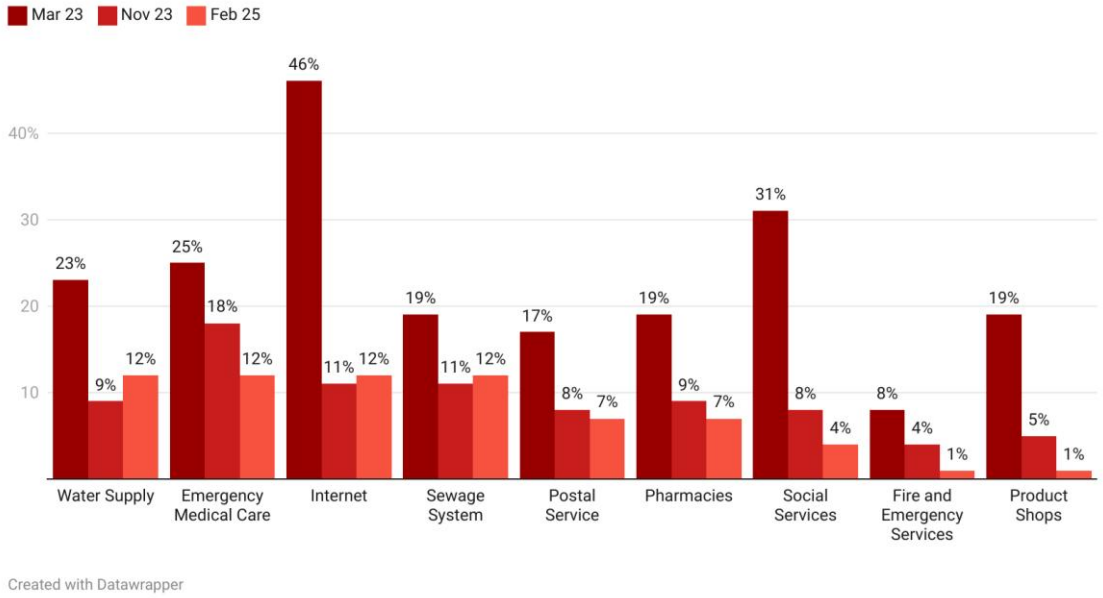
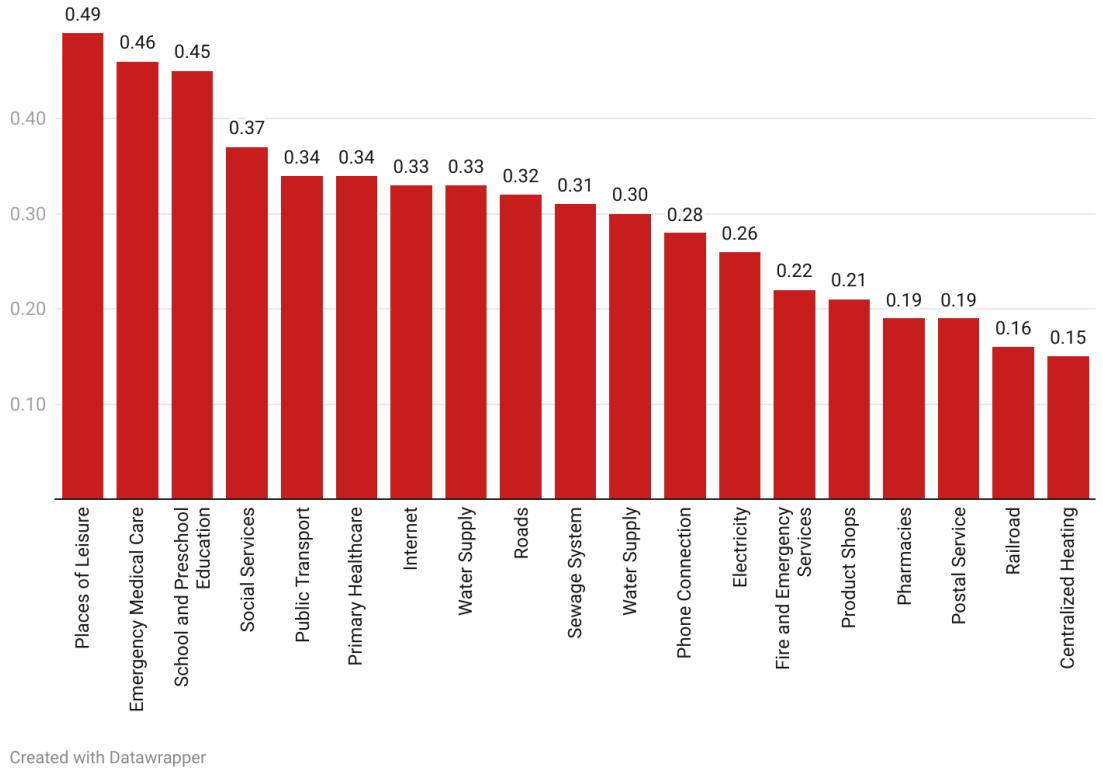


Figure 3. How infrastructure access relates to local well-being assessment.



Access to **recreational spaces, emergency care, and education** shows the strongest positive link to well-being (r = 0.49, 0.46, and 0.45 respectively). Improving access in these areas may have the highest payoff for local quality of life.

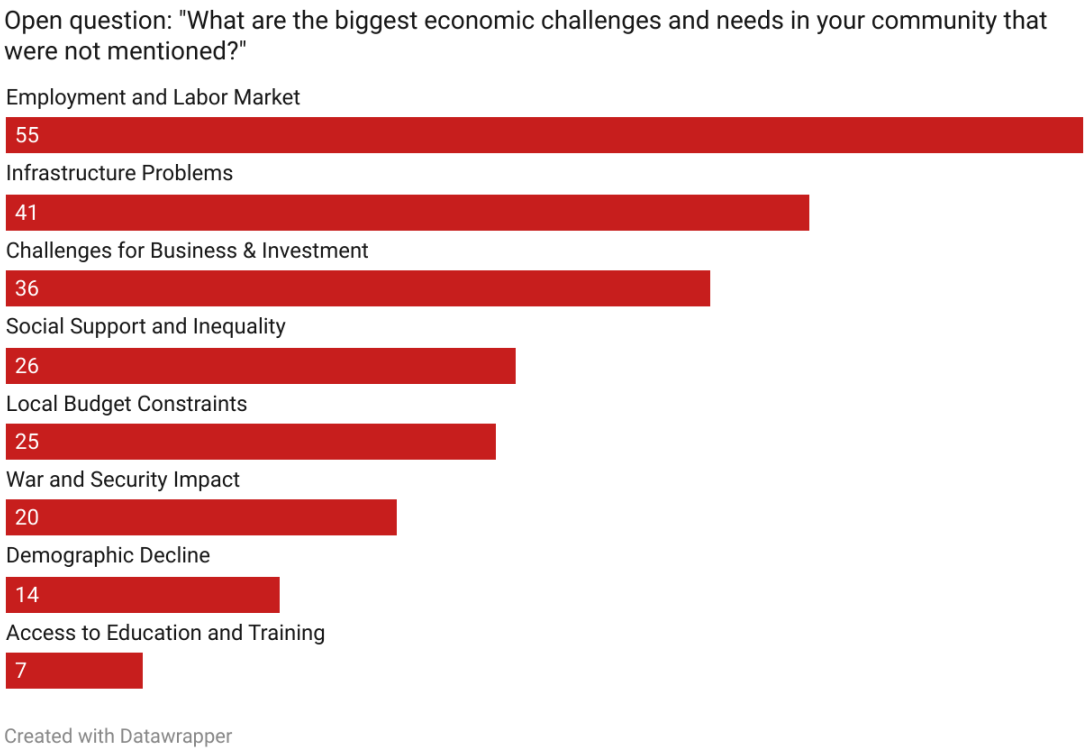
Improvements in infrastructure do not always reflect the full picture. Many communities continue to face serious economic obstacles that affect daily life. Drawing on activist testimonies, the next section highlights the key economic concerns affecting local populations.

Local economic challenges: insights from activists

Activists identify infrastructure decay, unemployment, business decline, and social inequality as major economic stressors at the local level.

Open-ended responses from survey participants highlight a wide array of economic challenges that communities across Ukraine continue to face amid the ongoing war.

Figure 4. Economic challenges in hromadas.



Issues related to **basic infrastructure** were among the most frequently cited (41 mentions). Respondents reported deteriorating roads, damaged utilities, limited access to public transportation, poor waste management, and the absence of bomb shelters. Many highlighted the long-term consequences of neglect and war-related destruction:

> *“There is no drinking water in the water supply system of the regional center. The situation has been dragging on since 2022; every year promises are made to solve it, but nothing happens.”*

> *“Shelters for the residents of (Name of the village). The warning system sounds the air raid alert, but people have nowhere to hide. Money was found for the warning system, but not for shelters.*

Employment and labor market challenges were mentioned 55 times, with specific concerns about unemployment, low wages (39 mentions), and poor working conditions. Respondents reported difficulty finding jobs matching their qualifications and pointed to shortages of specialists due to mobilization (16 mentions). These challenges appear to be evenly distributed across regions, with no significant geographical variation in the data. This aligns with national unemployment figures highlighting widespread labor market stress, though it contrasts with perspectives from employers in manufacturing and construction sectors, who continue to report labor shortages (Cooper 2024).

> *“Lack of jobs, low wages, and young people cannot find employment because schools and kindergartens are closed.”*

> *“Jobs are available, but they require specialists who, in turn, cannot work because they don’t have deferrals from mobilization.”*

Participants also raised concerns about **challenges for business and investment** (36 mentions), citing business relocation, limited access to financing, and weak support for entrepreneurship:

> *“Small and medium businesses face high taxes, limited access to concessional loans, and insufficient state support.”*

> *“The remnants of (Name of the city) businesses are selling off their assets and relocating... local budget funds are being spent wastefully.”*

In the area of **social support and inequality** (26 mentions), many emphasized the limited assistance available to pensioners, IDPs, and vulnerable groups, especially under rising inflation and living costs:

> *“The poor and people with disabilities are barely surviving.”*

> *“Assistance is needed for internally displaced persons, as well as humanitarian and psychological support.”*

Criticism also focused on **local budget constraints** (25 mentions), with some respondents highlighting a lack of transparency and questionable spending priorities.

> *“(Name of the city) authorities are spending money on paving tiles... the problem with water supply remains unresolved.”*

The **impact of war and security** was explicitly cited 20 times, often referencing the destruction of critical infrastructure and the broader disruption of economic life even in relatively peaceful areas:

> *Even in (Name of the city), a relatively peaceful region, the war affects all spheres of life – from prices to economic activity.*

The **demographic decline** was mentioned in 14 responses, with concerns about aging populations, outmigration, and low birth rates:

> *Last year, 116 people died, and only 9 were born.*

> *Young people are leaving en masse due to the lack of employment or education prospects.*

Finally, respondents mentioned **access to education and training** 7 times, noting that limited opportunities for youth development or workforce reskilling hinder long-term adaptability:

> *There are no initiatives to help young people develop or remain in the community.*

Together, these accounts underscore the structural and multifaceted nature of economic hardship at the local level. They suggest the need for a coordinated response that goes beyond short-term recovery – addressing labor market distortions, infrastructure gaps, budget management, and population loss to build long-term community resilience.

These concrete challenges help explain how people feel about their local economic situation. The next section presents changes in public perception of employment, income, and overall well-being, and explores how objective improvements align with subjective experiences.

Perceptions of economic conditions: steady improvement in employment and income, but mixed views on local well-being

Employment and income perceptions improved, but inflation, security risks, and structural unemployment offset gains in overall well-being.

The survey results highlight changes in perceptions of economic conditions between March 2023 and February 2025. Key findings include:

- Between March 2023 and February 2025, respondents reported notable improvements in local job markets. **Perceived employment opportunities rose** from 3.1 to 5.0, reflecting gradual stabilization, infrastructure recovery, and new local government employment initiatives. However, this trend may also be driven by a shrinking labor force due to military mobilization and migration, which has reduced competition for available jobs.

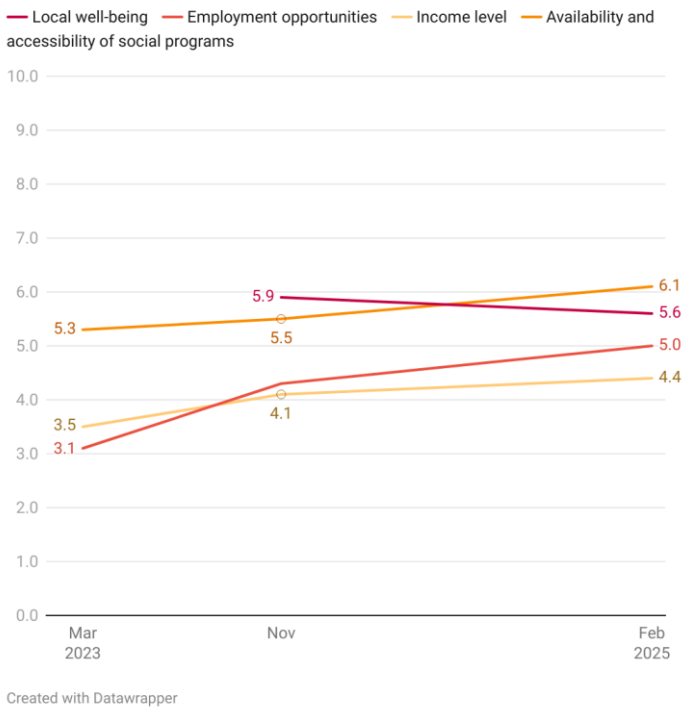
Despite these gains, the **unemployment rate** remained high – 16.8% as of February 2025 – indicating persistent structural weaknesses in the labor market (Centre for Economic Strategy 2025). The relatively high unemployment rate, combined with rising food and utility costs, may explain why improved job availability has not translated into higher overall economic satisfaction.

- **Perceived income levels also increased**, though more modestly: from 3.5 in March 2023 to 4.4 in February 2025. While average salaries rose to 23,500 UAH – a 59% increase over three years – the benefits have been partially offset by inflation (Work.ua 2025). In February 2025, annual inflation reached 13.2%, driven by poor harvests, energy shortages, and labor constraints (Centre for Economic Strategy 2025). Nearly all food categories saw price hikes. These pressures likely explain why rising incomes have not translated into stronger perceptions of financial well-being.

- Notably, **perceptions of local well-being declined slightly** from 5.9 in November 2023 to 5.6 in February 2025 despite better employment and income conditions. Inflation, cost of living increases, and security concerns appear to have constrained any broader sense of recovery particularly in frontline and high-risk areas.

- At the same time, **access to social programs improved**: from 5.3 to 6.1 over the same period. This reflects greater public recognition of government efforts to expand social safety nets. However, the survey coincided with a suspension of USAID support, which had previously provided $13.1 million for social services and education in 2024, alongside broader aid packages (Ekonomichna Pravda 2025). This pause in funding raises concerns about the future sustainability of local welfare systems and could erode confidence if gaps emerge in service delivery.

Figure 5. Economic conditions evaluation (rated on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is "very bad" and 10 is "excellent").



Overall, the data show a mixed recovery: stronger labor market indicators and expanded social programs, but persistent inflation, high unemployment, and geopolitical uncertainty continue to dampen perceived well-being.

The next section explores how local authorities are attempting to counter these challenges by supporting economic development, often in partnership with international donors.

How Local Authorities Contribute to Local Economic Development

Many local governments are supporting economic recovery through infrastructure upgrades, business aid, and social support – often with donor backing.

Open-ended responses indicate that many local governments are taking active steps to support local economic recovery. While 40 responses expressed dissatisfaction with inaction or lack of transparency (e.g., "The local authorities have done nothing for 6 months", "Complete stagnation of local programs"), a greater number described concrete initiatives across several areas:

- **Infrastructure development** (26 mentions) was the most commonly reported area of local intervention. Respondents noted efforts such as road repairs, modernization of water and wastewater systems, restoration of lighting, and improved transport services. One respondent noted: *"A water supply and wastewater modernization project is being implemented with NEFCO support."* Another stated: *"The problem with public transport is being successfully resolved – the vehicle fleet has been significantly expanded."*

- **Support for business and job creation** (25 mentions) included both financial and institutional efforts. Examples range from facilitating micro-grants for entrepreneurs to establishing industrial zones. As one respondent wrote: *"Supporting entrepreneurs in obtaining micro-grants for business recovery and development."* Another added: *"A bakery production facility has been opened, creating some job opportunities."*

- **Attracting international assistance** (23 mentions) emerged as a key strategy. Communities are leveraging partnerships with donors and grant programs. For example: *"Donors have begun to be engaged, and participation in grant programs has started. Cooperation with USAID Hoverla and ISAR Iednannia."* Another wrote: *"An amount of $190,000 is expected to be raised for two priority business projects."*

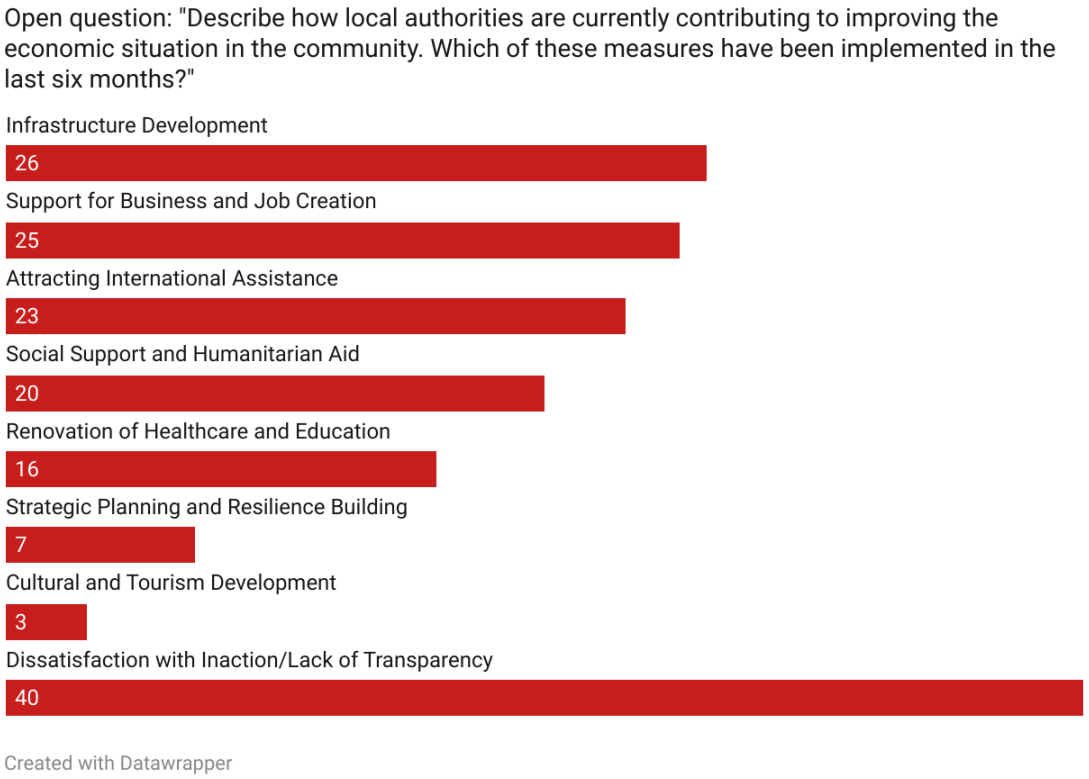
- **Social support and humanitarian aid** (20 mentions) included targeted actions for veterans and displaced persons. One activist noted: *"Providing housing and other essentials to people from affected regions."* Another added: *"Support for local businesses and the creation of new jobs, payments for IDPs."*

- **Renovation of healthcare and education facilities** (16 mentions) was also frequently noted. Responses included examples such as: *"Major renovation of the admissions department at the local hospital."* and *"The opening of underground schools – the only opportunity for children to study."*

- **Strategic planning and resilience building** (7 mentions) involved formal recovery strategies and local development planning. For example: *"The '(Name of the city) Development Strategy until 2028' program is being implemented."*

- **Cultural and tourism development** (3 mentions) included efforts to diversify local economies. One example: *"They are working on developing tourist routes and supporting small business development."*

Figure 6. Local initiatives to support economic recovery.



These examples show how local governments are building resilience through targeted action and international cooperation despite budget limitations. Still, uneven capacity and resource constraints mean that many hromadas lag behind.

2. Security

Ukrainian communities, especially near the frontlines, face continuous physical threats, social strain, and information warfare – placing local authorities under sustained pressure to manage both immediate safety and long-term cohesion.

Security challenges for Ukrainian communities remain significant, especially for frontline communities that are constantly shelled for more than three years in a row. Since February 24, 2022, Russia has launched 9,627 missiles and 13,997 drones at Ukraine (Defence Express 2025). While air defenses have intercepted 429 missiles and 9,272 drones, the scale of attacks remains overwhelming. In total, 11,879 targets have been hit, with the majority (6,203) being civilian infrastructure. These attacks routinely threaten lives, disrupt services, and stretch the capacity of local governments responsible for emergency response, infrastructure repair, and support to displaced residents.

The security burden is not limited to air attacks. Many communities are navigating the difficult process of **veteran reintegration** (Legal Hundred 2024). While returning service members bring essential skills, they also face significant adjustment challenges, including employment, health care - especially mental health - and social reintegration. Without adequate support, tensions may emerge between veterans, civilians, and other vulnerable groups, especially around access to services and resources (Centre of United Actions 2024a).

This social fragility is further exploited by **disinformation and sabotage efforts**. Russian and pro-Russian actors target local divisions to weaken public trust. For instance, recently, FSB agents in various communities and regions of Ukraine have started recruiting individuals to organize terrorist attacks at territorial recruitment centers (Texty.org.ua 2025). These actions are intended to spread fear, intimidate potential recruits, and frame soldiers and recruitment sites as targets, thereby deterring enlistment and disrupting military mobilization.

Responding effectively to these threats demands more than military defense. It requires:

- **Stronger local institutions** able to coordinate responses across sectors
- **Clear civil-military cooperation** at the community level (KSE Institute 2023)
- **Policies that foster social cohesion**, especially in communities with high levels of displacement or returnees

Strategic threats define the national context, but the lived experience of safety is shaped in local hromadas. The next section examines how people perceive these threats and how local authorities are managing their security responsibilities.

General Safety Conditions

Perceptions of public safety improved in mid-2023 but declined again by early 2025, reflecting the continued impact of airstrikes, cyberattacks, and governance challenges. Local authorities are seen as consistent but constrained in their ability to address growing security concerns.

Between March 2023 and February 2025, public assessments of overall safety in hromadas fluctuated. Average safety ratings rose from **5.2 to 6.2** between March and November 2023, then fell slightly to **5.9** by February 2025. The initial rise may reflect temporary stabilization along the frontlines or more visible security measures. The decline likely signals renewed concerns over missile strikes, sabotage, and internal threats amid intensified fighting and debate over mobilization and civil defense.

In 2024, Ukraine experienced extensive military aggression from Russia, with over 1,300 drone strikes and more than 250 missile launches targeting key infrastructure, including airstrikes on Kyiv, which resulted in significant residential damage and prolonged power outages (The Kyiv Independent 2024). The winter shelling campaigns, alongside missile attacks, heightened fears and disrupted daily life, leaving approximately 120 individuals homeless and severely affecting energy systems. Cyberattacks also surged, with Ukrainian cybersecurity teams reporting 4,315 incidents, a 70% rise from the previous year, primarily targeting critical infrastructure like energy and government sectors (Euromaidan Press 2025). While Ukrainian air defenses intercepted 1,300+ missiles and over 11,200 drones, Russia intensified its use of Shahed-type drones and guided bombs (Ukrainska Pravda 2024). These multi-pronged attacks, combined with sabotage incidents and the threat of disinformation, contributed to rising insecurity and deteriorating public safety perceptions in many regions.

Perceptions of **local government performance on public safety remained relatively stable**: 5.9 in March 2023 and 5.7 in both November 2023 and February 2025. This suggests that while local authorities are seen as working steadily on security, they are not perceived to be making clear progress.

Several factors may explain this plateau:

- **Split authority** between Local Self-Government Bodies (LSGBs) and Local Military Administrations (LMAs), often operating in the same territory, creates public confusion about who is responsible for what (Darkovich and Savisko 2024).

- Residents frequently attribute unpopular or unclear decisions made by LMAs to LSGBs, leading to misplaced criticism and undermining local trust.

- The **Razumkov Centre** found that **20-30% of local leaders** cite insufficient budgets as the main reason for not supporting Territorial Defense volunteer units - highlighting a major capacity gap in local defense efforts.

Perceptions of local **police performance** declined modestly, from **6.7 in March 2023** to **6.2 in February 2025**. This drop may reflect concerns about crime prevention, rising attention to domestic violence, and dissatisfaction with the broader wartime law enforcement role.

Under martial law, police have expanded their responsibilities: enforcing curfews, monitoring movement, and coordinating with military authorities. These new tasks may divert attention from community policing and crime response.

This shift is reflected in **national trust trends**:

- Trust in the National Police rose from 30% in 2021 to 58% in 2022, but dropped to 41% in 2023 and further to 37% in 2024 (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2024).

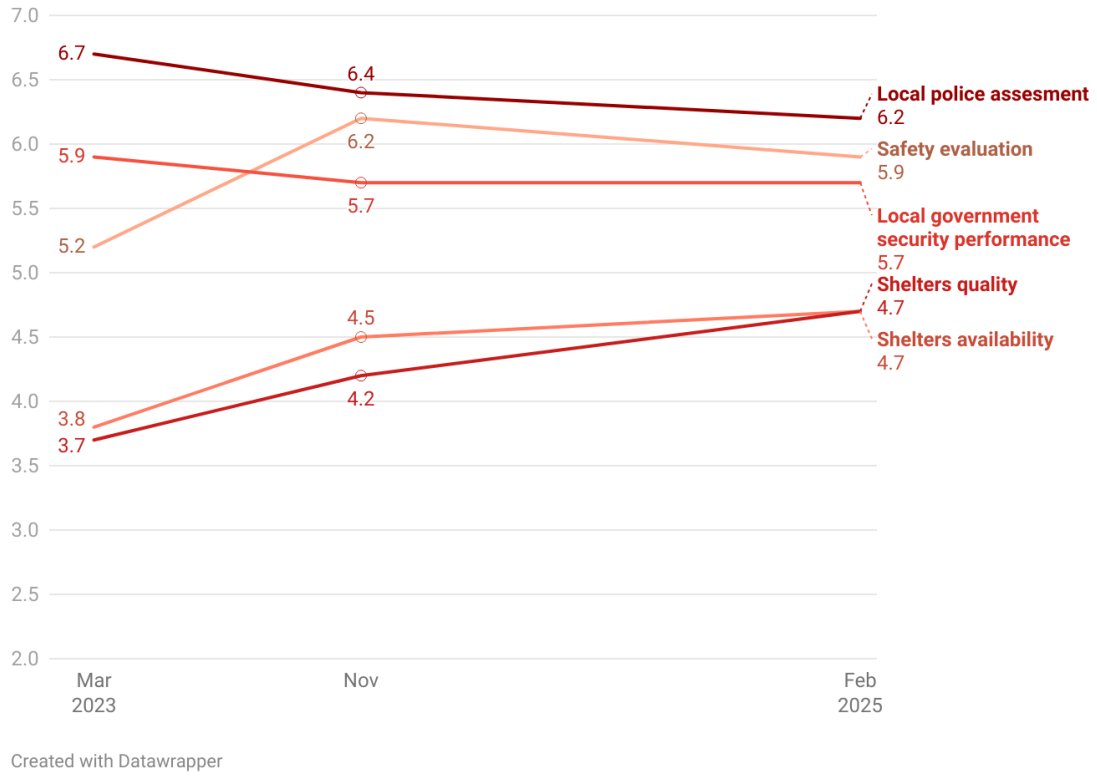
- The Rating Group reported a similar decline: from 56% trust in 2023 to 48% in 2024 (Rating Group Ukraine 2024).

Shelter infrastructure is the one area where improvements are more clearly perceived. The availability of shelters increased from 3.8 in March 2023 to 4.7 in February 2025, while the perceived quality of shelters rose from 3.7 to 4.7 during the same period.

These gains likely reflect active local and civil society efforts to map, renovate, and publicize shelter spaces after intensified aerial threats. Yet both metrics remain below the midpoint on a 10-point scale, indicating that safe, accessible, and modern shelters remain in short supply.

Local authorities are legally responsible for shelter infrastructure but face funding gaps. To compensate, many seek international grants and implement creative solutions such as above-ground shelters (Centre of United Actions 2024b). In 2024, the government launched the National Protective Shelter Program, aiming to build 13,300 new shelters over the next decade, with a planned investment of 789.3 billion UAH (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2025b).

Figure 7. Changes in the security conditions (on a scale from 1 to 10).



While some aspects of physical protection, especially shelters, have improved, broader perceptions of security remain fragile. Mixed views on police, unclear institutional roles, and ongoing aerial and cyber threats shape how people judge safety in their communities. Strengthening local police capacity, clarifying civil-military responsibilities, and accelerating shelter development will be essential to restoring public confidence.

The next section examines how specific threats – missile strikes, cyberattacks, and internal unrest – are prioritized by the public and how these perceptions have evolved over time.

Perceptions of Security Threats

War-related dangers: missile attacks and direct military assaults – remain the dominant public concern, but awareness of digital, displacement-related, and social threats is rising. This shift underscores the need for a broader, multi-dimensional approach to civilian security.

Perceptions of security threats have evolved between 2023 and 2025, shaped by changing frontline dynamics, renewed hostilities, and broader awareness of non-traditional risks.

- **Missile attacks** remain the top concern, rising from 69% in March 2023 to 72% in February 2025, following a temporary decline. This increase likely reflects intensified aerial assaults in winter 2024-2025 and ongoing infrastructure damage.
- **Direct military attack or shelling** regained salience in early 2025 (38%), especially with Russian offensives near Zaporizhzhia, Pokrovsk, and into Sumy Oblast.
- **Cybercrime** has steadily gained attention (17% → 25%), pointing to rising awareness of digital threats amid growing cyber incidents.
- **Forced displacement**, after a drop in 2023, rose again to 23% in 2025, likely due to renewed fighting and localized displacements.
- Meanwhile, **daily fire hazards** (33% → 22%) and **petty crimes** (27% → 14%) declined, possibly reflecting improved local policing or shifting focus to wartime dangers.
- Concerns about **domestic violence and sexual harassment**, which spiked in 2023, decreased again to 15% in 2025 – potentially shaped by advocacy campaigns and reporting trends.
- Lower concern persists for **area mining** (down to 10%) and **illegal arms trafficking**, though both remain real threats in frontline regions.

The sustained prominence of war-related threats, alongside growing concern about digital and social vulnerabilities, highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to civilian security. Between 2023 and 2025, Ukraine implemented several policy measures to address evolving security threats.

In April 2023, the Ukrainian government approved the **State Policy Strategy on Internal Displacement until 2025**, focusing on supporting IDPs through safe evacuation, adaptation in host communities, and reintegration upon return (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2024a).

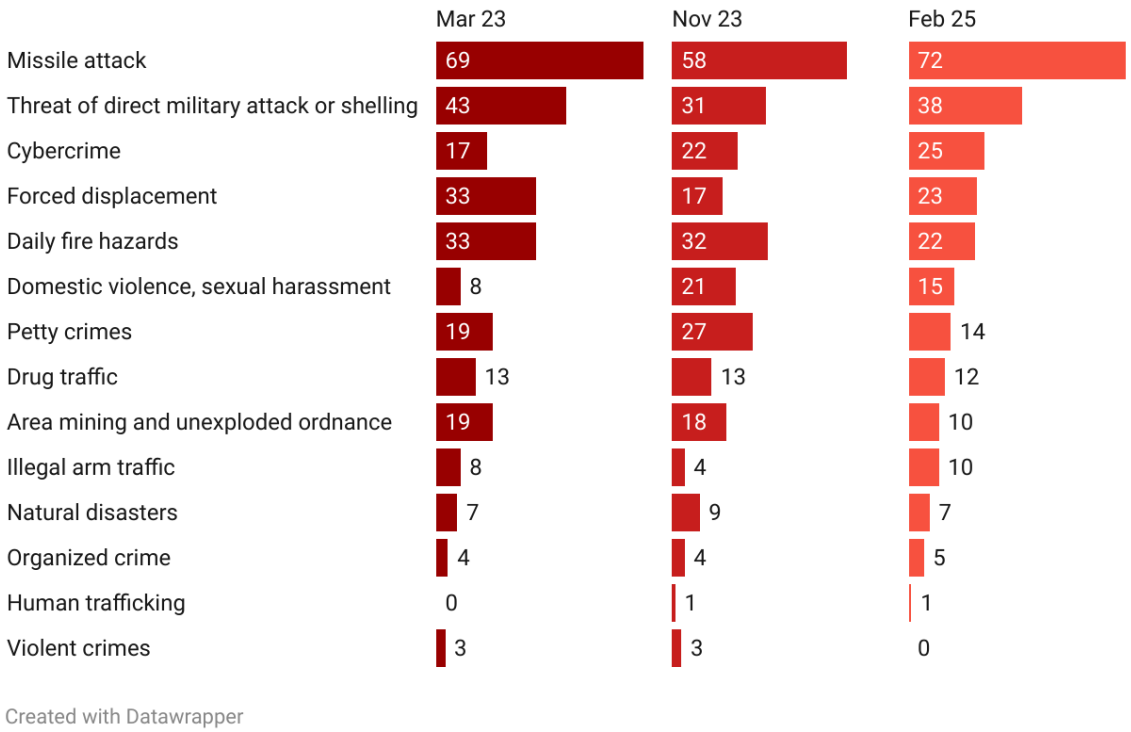
In February 2024, the government prioritized **defense capability and citizen security** in its action plan, allocating resources to strengthen defense lines, increase weapon and equipment production, and enhance public safety measures, including the construction of

shelters and deployment of security specialists in educational environments (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2024b).

To bolster cybersecurity, Ukraine formalized a **Working Arrangement with the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA)** in December 2023, to improve coordination and capacity-building (European Union Agency for Cybersecurity 2023).

In March 2025, the Cabinet of Ministers **approved the final phase of Ukraine's Cybersecurity Strategy** (2021-2025), focusing on enhancing the regulatory framework, strengthening protection of critical infrastructure through a risk-based approach, increasing international cooperation, and expanding cybersecurity training programs (State Service of Special Communications and Information Protection of Ukraine 2024).

Figure 8. Respondents' perceived importance of security threats.



While physical attacks remain the most pressing threat, digital, social, and displacement-related risks are growing in prominence. Public concern reflects a more complex security environment that requires not only military defense, but also strengthened local capacity, risk communication, and institutional preparedness.

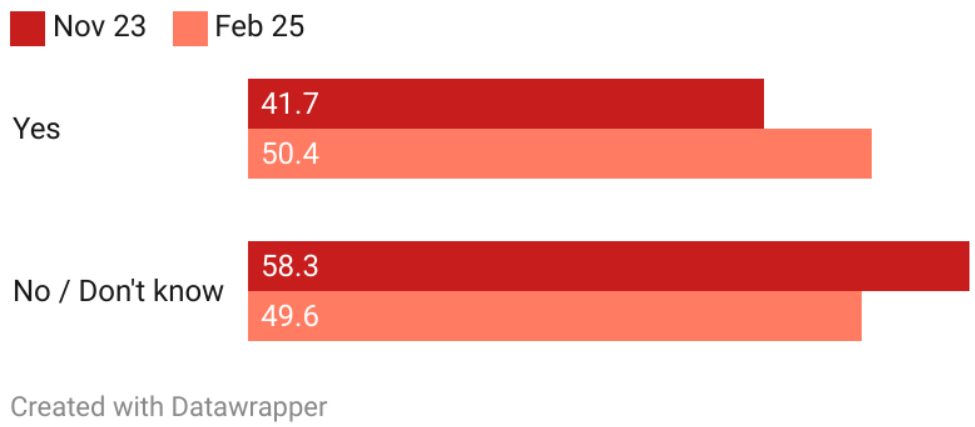
The following section turns to an essential component of this preparedness: civilian awareness of and participation in military training and national defense efforts.

Military Training for Civilians

Awareness of civilian military training has increased, but participation has dropped sharply - highlighting a disconnect between recognition and action, likely shaped by war fatigue, reduced urgency, and shifting perceptions of risk.

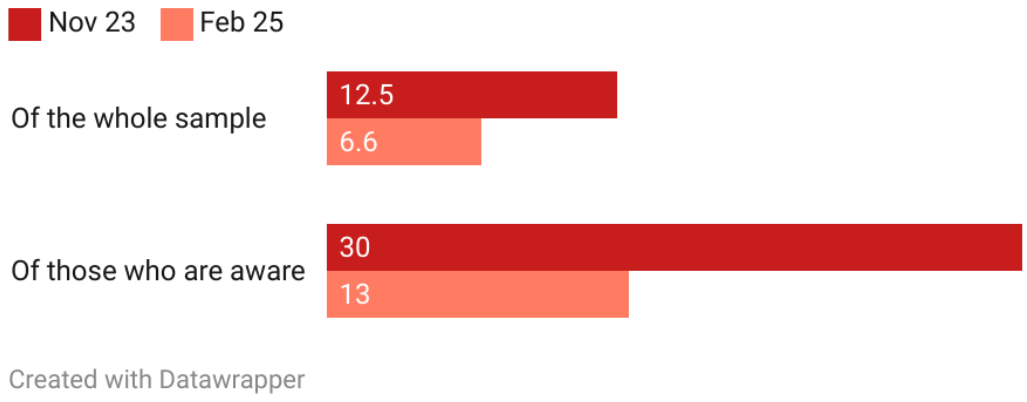
Between November 2023 and February 2025, **public awareness of military training programs for civilians rose** from 42% to 50%, likely due to increased efforts by national and local authorities to promote defense readiness.

Figure 9. Changes in awareness of civil military training in hromada.



However, **actual participation fell** significantly: only 7% of respondents – or 13% of those aware – reported taking part in training by early 2025, down from 30% a year earlier. This decline suggests a substantial drop in civilian engagement despite greater outreach. It may be influenced by war fatigue, limited local access to programs, or shifting expectations about the conflict's trajectory. The launch of international peace talks in February 2025 may have created hopes for de-escalation, reducing the perceived urgency to prepare for defense.

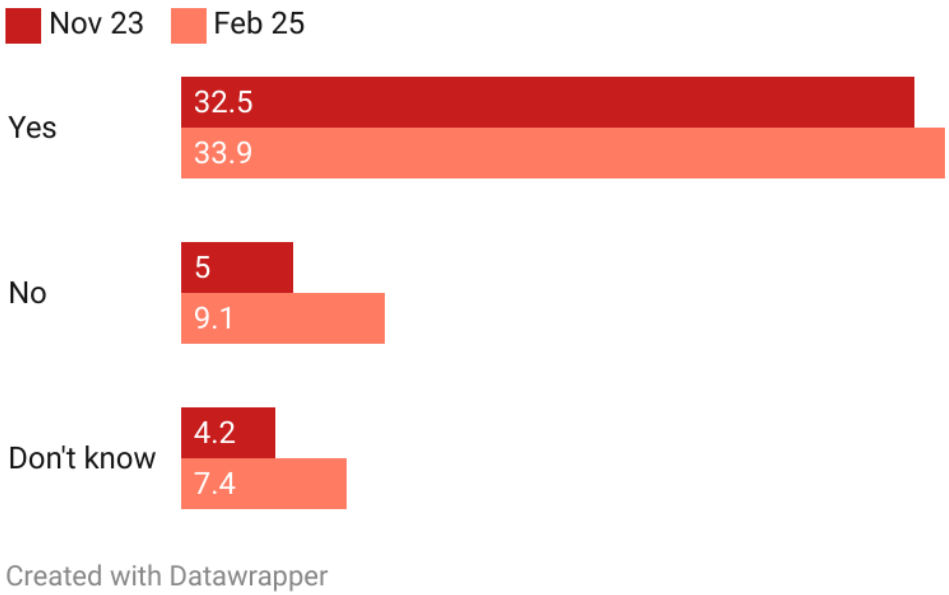
Figure 10. Changes in civil military training participation.



While direct involvement has declined, **indirect exposure** remains steady: about **one in three respondents** report that a family member, friend, or acquaintance has participated in a training program. This social proximity may help sustain general awareness and openness to future participation, even among those currently disengaged.

The contrast between rising awareness and falling engagement underscores how psychological and social dynamics – rather than informational gaps – are driving decisions about military preparedness. Understanding these perceptions will be key for designing more effective communication and outreach strategies.

Figure 11. Changes in indirect civil military training participation.



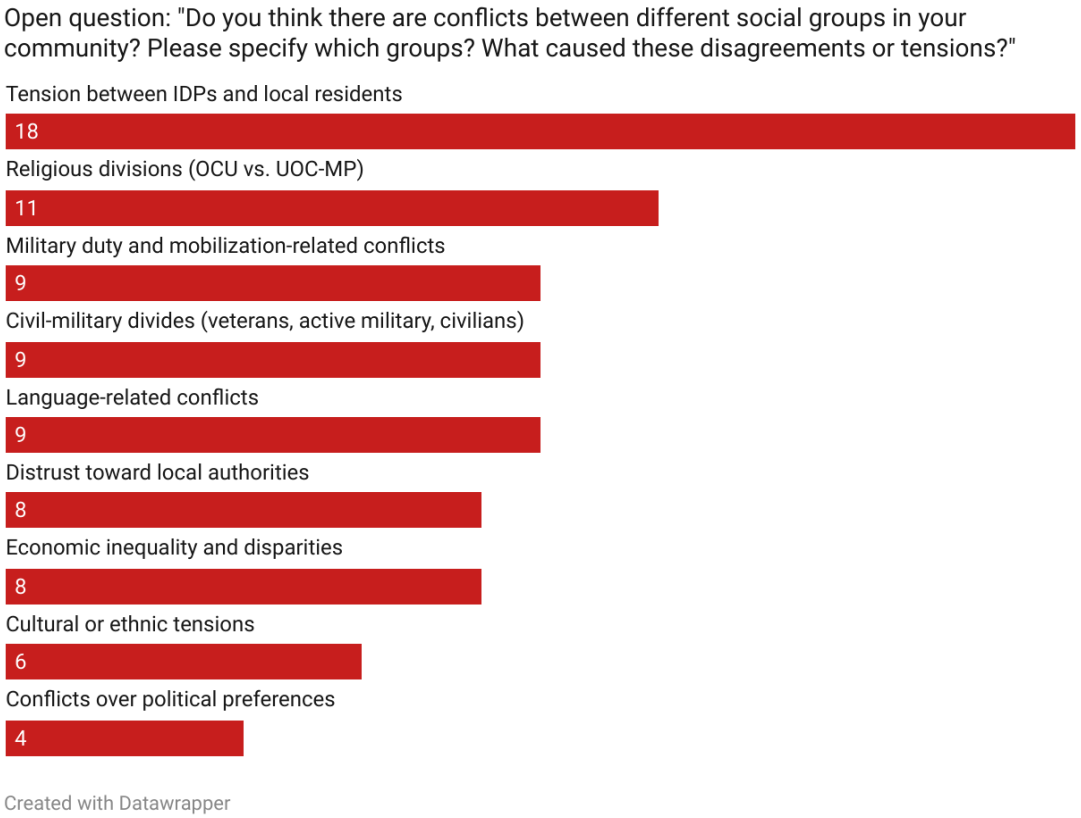
As the war continues, civilian preparedness is just one side of community resilience. The next section turns to the social tensions and divisions that have emerged under wartime pressure and how they affect collective solidarity.

Social Tensions in Communities

Only **43% of respondents** reported the presence of social conflict in their community. However, the narratives collected indicate that where tensions do exist, they often reflect **long-standing structural divides**, now **exacerbated by the war**. These include disputes over aid, governance, military duty, religious affiliation, language, and economic inequality.

> *“There isn’t outright conflict, but there is some tension. Residents are often dissatisfied with certain expenditures by the city council. Since everything is now accessible through ProZorro, and journalists actively publish this information on social media, people see and discuss it.”*

Figure 12. Social tensions in hromadas.



The most frequently mentioned source of tension involves **IDPs and local residents** (18 mentions). Respondents noted resentment toward what they perceived as unequal access to assistance and resources, particularly when IDPs receive targeted support that long-term vulnerable locals do not. Some emphasized distrust toward male IDPs, who are seen by some as avoiding military duty.

This issue was most frequently mentioned in Ivano-Frankivsk and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts, both of which host large numbers of internally displaced persons. This suggests that tensions may be more likely in areas with high IDP concentrations, rather than being specific to frontline or rear regions.

> *“Assistance is provided only to IDPs, while the local vulnerable population has been ignored for a long time.”*

> *“There is tension between local residents and internally displaced persons (male individuals).”*

Separate interviews were conducted to address this sensitive issue. However, even when interviewees mentioned potential conflicts between IDPs and host communities, they were typically unable to cite specific instances during the interview after the survey. According to these respondents, the perceived problem lay primarily in unequal access to assistance and facilities, creating tension between IDPs and local residents who also required support.

> *I don't have any tensions with IDPs, but I can see from the comments on social media that yes, someone writes about some problems… The tension is that, for example, IDPs have moved, and there is no free housing in the city. It is simply rented for outrageous prices. But this is not only in our community, I talked to others. Basically, such a situation is everywhere.*

> *IDPs arrive, and they start getting cash assistance and other help. The city residents are not given anything. Unless you are disabled or something else happened to you there. And I see how the locals treat the IDPs... The behavior is also [the issue]. How can I explain it to you properly, but not all [Name of the city] residents are good people, right? It's the same story with IDPs.*

Some activists encounter difficulties involving IDPs in projects or distributing aid effectively. This suggests potential underlying issues linked to the processes of community initiation and social integration for displaced individuals. These experiences remain highly varied, limiting the scope for broad generalizations within this research.

> *It was difficult to engage [IDPs]. They didn't want to come, even with humanitarian aid. You offer, but not everyone accepts even humanitarian aid. Although, when we managed to involve IDPs, we organized support groups, they spoke out, they cried, they spoke out about all the painful things that you sit there and get goosebumps. Yes, such events are important, but I don't know how to involve them on a regular basis. Many people have opened businesses in our city, for example, and have been very successful.*

Religious divisions between the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) also appeared frequently (11 mentions). Respondents cited hostility and deep mistrust rooted in political and wartime affiliations. These tensions were particularly concentrated in Volyn oblast, where several communities reported disputes over church affiliation.

> *Conflicts between those who support the Moscow Patriarchate and those who support the OCU.*

> *The issue of the church – Moscow Patriarchate versus Ukrainian Patriarchate – is quite sensitive. In our area, where the village council and administrative services are located, there is a monastery under the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP). This naturally raises concerns. People start arguing among themselves, creating unnecessary division at a time when unity is crucial.*

In August 2024, the Ukrainian government enacted Law No. 3894-IX "On the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Field of Activities of Religious Organizations," which prohibits the activities of religious organizations affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church. The law provides a nine-month period for such organizations to demonstrate the absence of legal, financial, or institutional ties with the Moscow Patriarchate (Suspilne 2024).

Law enforcement investigations have confirmed that such concerns are not unfounded. Since 2022, the Security Service of Ukraine has uncovered numerous cases of espionage, sabotage coordination, and dissemination of pro-Russian propaganda involving clergy and affiliates of the UOC-MP. For example, in 2023 alone, over 60 criminal proceedings were opened against UOC-MP representatives, with documented cases of cooperation with Russian intelligence services and even correction of missile strikes (Hromadske 2023;

Radio Svoboda 2023). These incidents underscore the urgency of both legal regulation and community-level dialogue to address the complex intersection of religion, identity, and national security.

Given the sensitivity and potential for community division stemming from this religious conflict, local actors sometimes initiate structured dialogues to manage the tensions. An interview participant described one such attempt.

> *“There was a meeting [initiated by the deputies], the clergy were invited with lawyers representing them, and all the deputies were present. They presented their documents, proof of what they were saying: “Yes, if there is an all-Ukrainian law signed by the president that they really have to rule in Ukrainian, they will switch.” They talked and argued a bit. The community members were also present. Everyone left in a tolerant manner.”*

Another significant theme concerns **tensions around military duty and mobilization** (9 mentions), including disputes between families of soldiers and civilians believed to be evading service. These tensions are often interlinked with broader **civil-military divides** (9 mentions), including difficulties veterans and active-duty personnel face reintegrating into local communities.

> *“Military personnel who have returned from the front are dissatisfied with the authorities’ attitude toward them.”*

> *“Tension between the military, veterans, and those who evade mobilization.”*

Language-related conflicts remain salient (9 mentions), particularly in communities reshaped by displacement. Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking residents may differ in views on language use and identity. These were most commonly reported in Ivano-Frankivsk oblast, where the presence of Russian-speaking IDPs created friction in predominantly Ukrainian-speaking areas.

> *“Differences in views still exist between Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking populations.”*

> *“The interaction between Ukrainian speakers and Russian speakers is a deeply personal issue for me. In Poltava, we have quite a lot of Russian speakers, and it’s unclear how to navigate this. If we simply ignore it, we’ll lose strategically again because the Russian-speaking environment keeps eroding our cultural and mental boundaries. But at the same time, you can’t just pressure people either.”*

Distrust toward local authorities was mentioned in 8 responses. Activists described tensions stemming from corruption, opaque decision-making, or the perception that authorities prioritize their own interests over those of the community.

> *“There is tension between the local government and residents; the authorities care about their financial well-being, while community members try to cover all needs at their own expense.”*

> *“ The head of our community illegally raised the water supply tariff. ”*

Economic inequality and disparities were also mentioned (8 responses), with some communities experiencing visible gaps in income and unequal access to services.

> *“ A large difference in wages between different segments of the population. ”*

Less frequently, respondents described **cultural or ethnic tensions** (6 mentions), such as those involving Roma communities or seasonal disputes between locals and tourists.

> *“ We have a Roma community in (Name of the village), and they do not have the best reputation. ”*

> *“ During the tourist season, conflicts occur between locals and tourists. ”*

Finally, a few responses mentioned **conflicts over political preferences** (4 mentions), indicating that ideological divides continue to influence local relations even during wartime.

Though reported by a minority, these tensions are often intense and rooted in longstanding grievances. The war has not only **exposed existing social divisions**, but in some cases **deepened them**. Local authorities may need to strengthen efforts to mediate disputes, ensure fair access to resources, and promote inclusive dialogue to prevent these divisions from deepening.

3. Governance and Civicness

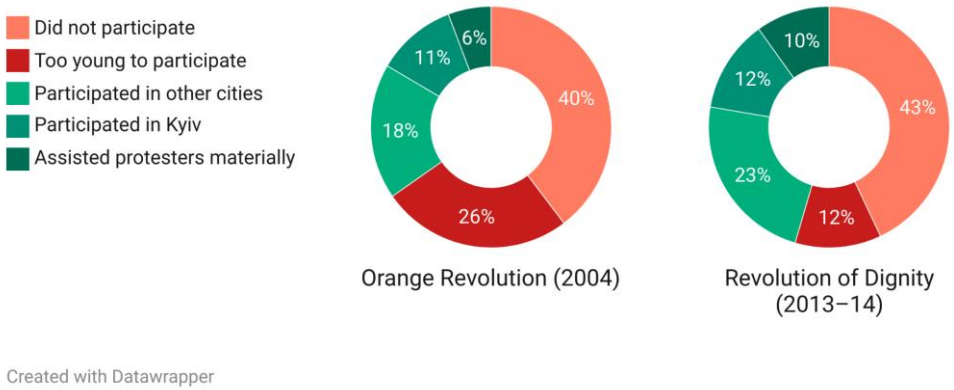
In the context of the ongoing full-scale war with Russia, the **significance of local governance and decentralization** has become more pronounced than ever. Ukraine has been grappling with the challenges of war for almost three years, with local governments often being central to crisis management, essential service delivery, and ensuring social stability (Rabinovych et al. 2023).

When discussing local governance, it is crucial to mention the closure of USAID programs and the **ongoing full-scale war**, which has now lasted for over three years (The New Voice of Ukraine 2025). These two factors have significantly impacted the landscape for local NGOs and their ability to function effectively (Prostir.ua 2025). **Humanitarian organizations** have become **dominant players in the job market**, offering **salaries that are two to three times higher** than the local market rate, simply because they require employees with specific skills, such as English proficiency. This situation has created a sort of **"salary dumping"** effect, where local NGOs, struggling with resource constraints, are unable to compete with these inflated wages. This trend not only undermines the local labor market but also weakens the sustainability and independence of smaller, community-based organizations that play a crucial role in local governance.

Another important aspect to highlight is the **decentralization of civic initiatives,** which has expanded beyond just Kyiv or urban hromadas and regional centers, **something that was not seen during previous waves of civic engagement**, such as during the Revolution of Dignity. This shift is largely due to the **unique scale of volunteer efforts** aimed at **helping relatives, friends, and communities**, which has **involved social groups that had not been engaged in such activities before**. The war, especially during its early months, sparked mass mobilization, where many people, including those outside the typical spheres of volunteerism, took part in fundraising, relief efforts, and other civic actions.

In the context of the ongoing full-scale war with Russia, the significance of local governance and decentralization has become more pronounced than ever. Ukraine has been grappling with the challenges of war for almost three years, with local governments often being central to crisis management, essential service delivery, and ensuring social stability.

Figure 13. Previous activism experience of key informants.



Importantly, this trend is not limited to the youth or educated individuals; it has **reached broader demographics, including older people, rural populations**, and those with less formal education. The large-scale involvement in volunteering has also led to a significant **rise in fundraising activities**. Numerous fundraising "bank accounts" or initiatives have been opened throughout the country, showcasing the growing involvement of ordinary citizens. For instance, it is reported that **86% of Ukrainians engaged in fundraising in 2024** (Zagoriy Foundation 2025). Also, more than 10 million people **donated 77.9 billion UAH** to Ukrainian bank Monobank accounts in 1000 days since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Interfax-Ukraine 2024).These trends are crucial to describe, as they represent a significant shift in Ukraine's civic engagement landscape, highlighting a more inclusive and widespread form of community support and mobilization.

Perception of Local Government Efficiency

Perceptions of local government efficiency demonstrated moderate improvement between March 2023 and February 2025 across all evaluated dimensions. Respondents provided consistently middle-range ratings, indicating a cautious acknowledgement of gradual improvements, coupled with persistent reservations about performance.

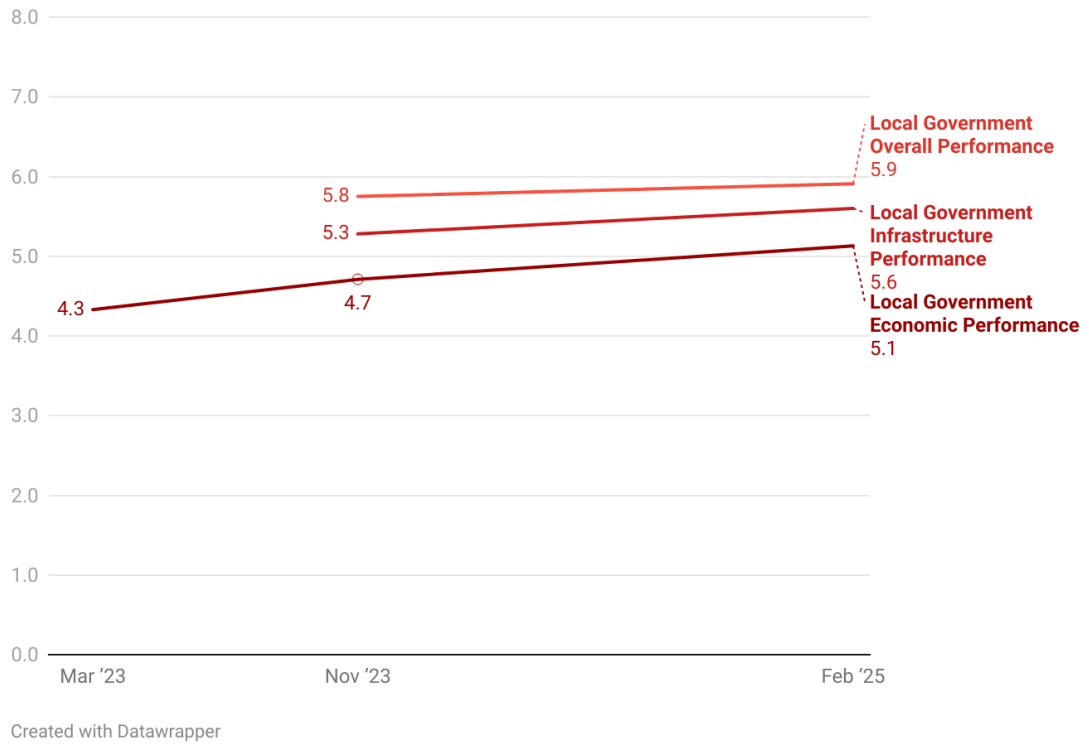
The overall assessment of local government performance demonstrated stability between survey waves, shifting marginally from 5.75 (November 2023) to 5.91 (February 2025), a difference that was not statistically significant. Factors associated with decentralization, such as established local budgets and service responsibilities, may contribute to the context influencing these consistent ratings, rather than reflecting a distinct improvement during this specific period.

Evaluations of economic governance and local budget management exhibited a more noticeable upward trend, rising from 4.33 in March 2023 to 4.71 in November 2023 and further to 5.13 in February 2025. Although the trajectory is clearly positive, these scores suggest ongoing concerns about economic policies and fiscal management, with ratings remaining moderate overall.

Infrastructure-related assessments improved from 5.28 in November 2023 to 5.60 in February 2025, reflecting recognition of gradual progress. This corresponds with the findings in the section *Access to Infrastructure and Services: General Improvement with Persistent Challenges*, which highlights better access to communication and education services, while noting persistent issues with roads, transport, and utilities. Despite improvements, ongoing challenges in these areas continue to limit more favorable evaluations.

These modest positive trends across governance evaluations point to growing recognition of local government efforts, while underscoring the persistent need for targeted improvement, particularly in economic governance and infrastructure provision.

Figure 14. Evaluation of local authority performance.



Performance evaluations, however, do not exist in isolation. They are shaped by direct experiences of cooperation or conflict with local authorities. The following section examines these dynamics more closely.

Cooperation and Interaction with Local Government

After the **sharp decline in perceived systematic cooperation** between local self-government (LSG) and key societal actors during 2023, the third wave of the survey (February 2025) indicates a **stabilization of these perceptions**, and even an **increase in several domains**. This dynamic is not only statistically notable but also conceptually expected when viewed **through the lens of post-invasion political and social behavior**. In the first months of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, there was a strong *"rally around the flag"* effect – widespread citizen mobilization in support of the military and local authorities amid existential threat. During that crisis phase, cooperation between LSGs and the military, volunteers, and civil society actors was not only constant but highly visible to citizens: *people wove camouflage nets, volunteered inside city councils, or joined ad hoc coordination centers*. These forms of engagement were immediate, emotionally charged, and easily observable in everyday life.

By 2024-2025, however, the nature of this **cooperation has evolved**. Local governments have become more self-sufficient, gained shock experience, improved internal coordination, and now **rely less on spontaneous civil initiatives for routine functions**. Cooperation with the military, international actors, or NGOs has not disappeared – rather, its form has **become more professionalized, formalized, and less visible to the public**. For security reasons and due to shifts in the mode of assistance, current interactions often involve needs assessments, procurement, logistical coordination, or infrastructure planning – forms of support that do not manifest as openly as the emergency volunteerism

of the early war months. Therefore, the plateauing and selective increase in perceived cooperation likely reflect not a weakening of ties, but a transformation in the repertoire of collaboration between LSGs and other actors under prolonged wartime conditions.

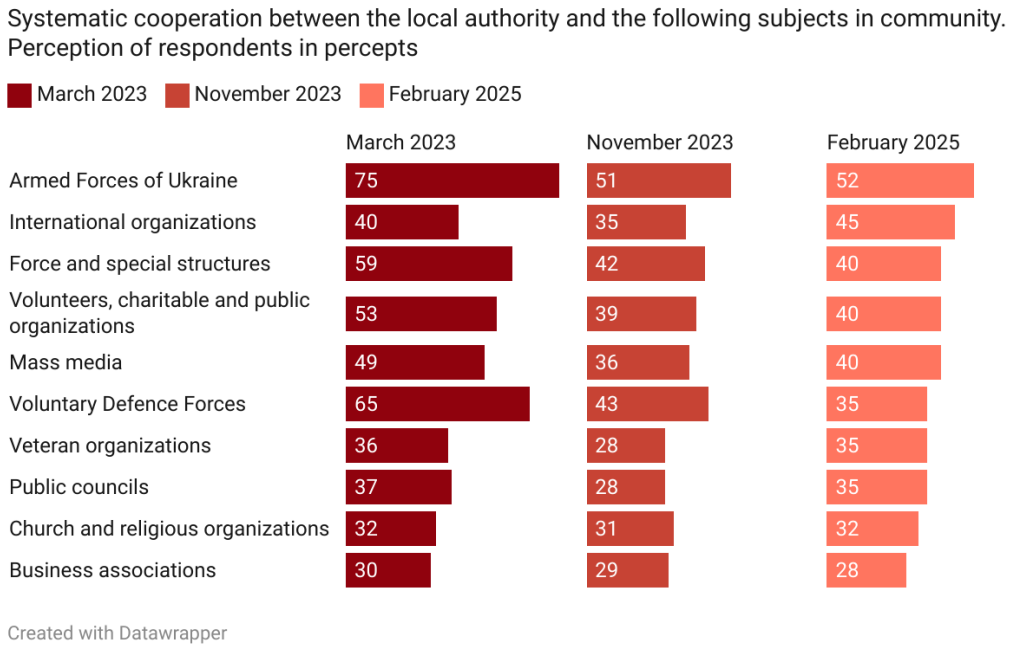
> *I have found that an effective approach is ensuring my letter is officially registered – once that happens, I will receive an official response. Whether they want to or not, a decision will be made. This is a functional tool. Of course, I can call the deputy mayors to discuss the issue, but without formal letters, nothing moves forward.*

> *The best format if you really want to get something from the authorities, one hundred percent, is to write a letter. You can talk to them directly, you can solve something, but you still have to write a letter. So that you can be sure that you are not forbidden to do so.*

The formation of **civil councils**, essentially functioning as advisory boards focused on specific issues, presents a valuable mechanism for structured civic engagement. Regardless of their formal institutionalization, the appearance of such bodies can serve as a crucial conduit for communication between activists and local authorities, offering a platform to raise concerns and potentially influence policy, as illustrated by one respondent's experience:

> *[The Volunteer Council] is a tool through which you can address the authorities, send letters and other things directly. Representatives of the authorities are also in this chat. They can be contacted, they can provide some kind of answer. So it speeds up communication. But we had a story about the alley of glory of the fallen volunteers. In the park, the land was supposedly allocated [by the city council], but we still raised money on magnolias there ourselves. The authorities did not help much, but maybe they just did not interfere.*

Figure 15. LSG systematic cooperation.



According to surveys conducted across the same cohort of respondents during all three waves, perceptions of structured interaction have generally declined in 2023 and **plateaued in 2025**. The initial surge of wartime solidarity, marked by intense local coordination and community mobilization, appears to have diminished over time, as identified in previous PeaceRep reports and related studies, **making room for more fragmented or institutionalised forms of cooperation**. This tendency we have seen also in surveys of LSGs, that become engaging non-governmental stakeholders **for pragmatic purposes**: attracting resources to the community and meeting the needs of vulnerable social groups (IDPs and veterans) (Darkovich et al. 2024).

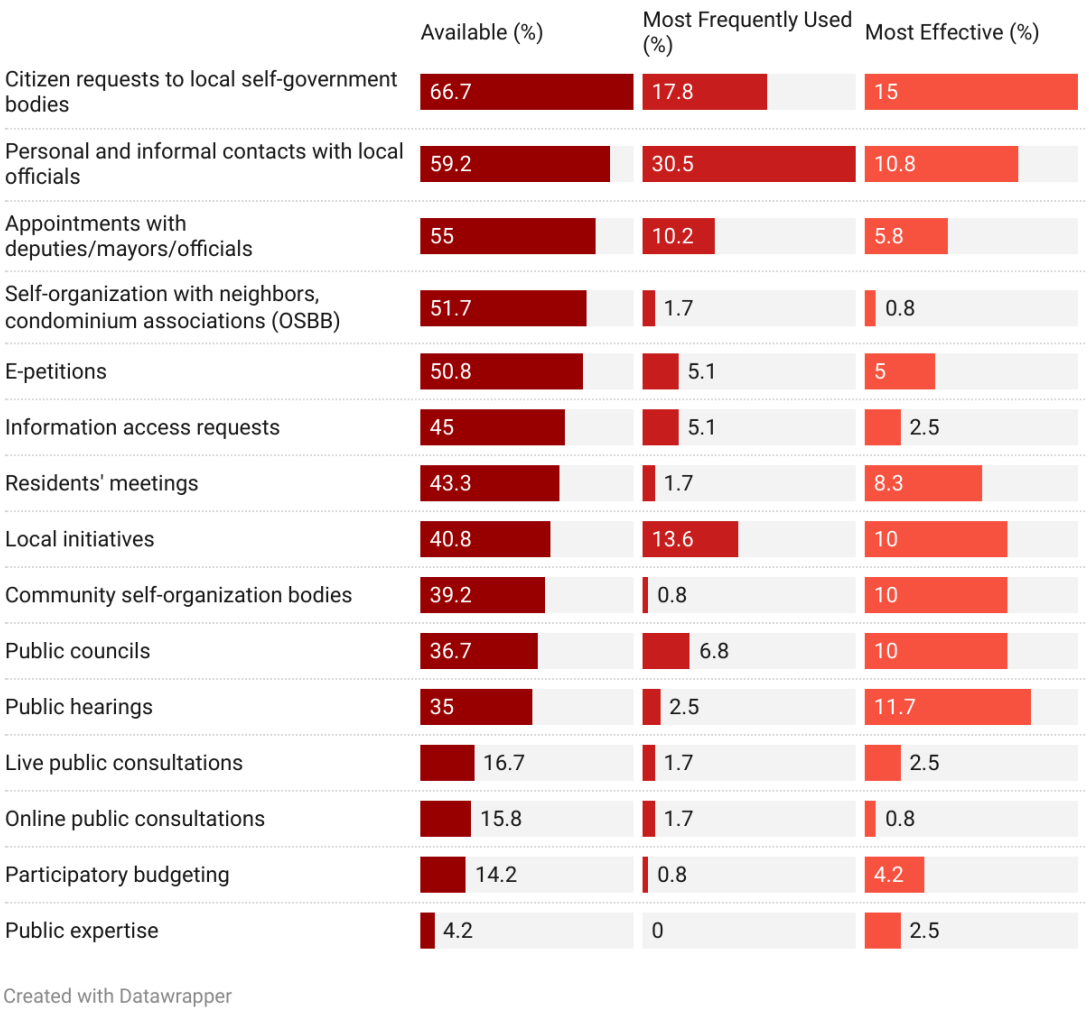
The most pronounced **decline can be observed in cooperation with the Armed Forces of Ukraine**, which dropped from 75% in March 2023 to just over 51% by end of 2023 and plateaued in 2025. Similar reductions are seen with the Voluntary Defence Forces (from 65% to 35%), charitable and public organizations (from 53% to 40%).

Several possible explanations account for this downturn. First, the immediate urgency of the **early war period fostered high levels of spontaneous coordination**, often bypassing formal bureaucratic channels. As the war persisted and emergency routines became institutionalized, **interaction likely became less visible**, more selective, and subject to regulatory or logistical constraints. Second, previous research highlighted growing dissatisfaction among activists and volunteers with perceived non-transparency, uneven access to decision-making, and politicization of aid distribution, all of which may have contributed to reduced perceptions of systemic cooperation. Lastly, fatigue – both institutional and psychological – combined with resource depletion at the local level, likely eroded the capacity for sustained engagement with a broad array of actors.

Interestingly, the third wave shows some signs of **stabilization and even modest recovery in selected areas**. Perceived cooperation **with international organizations** rose from 35% in November 2023 to **45% in February 2025**, possibly due to renewed international donor programs or deeper embedding of NGOs in local response mechanisms. Similarly, **cooperation with mass media, veteran organizations, and public councils either stabilized or slightly increased**, which may be linked to the changing needs of war-affected communities – particularly in terms of information provision, reintegration of veterans, and attempts to institutionalize participatory mechanisms. This partial rebound suggests that while trust and engagement deteriorated over time, they remain responsive to targeted interventions, external support, and improvements in transparency and communication.

Beyond general trends, it is also important to understand how activists personally experience their interaction with authorities. The next section dives into concrete examples of collaboration, conflict, and mixed experiences.

Figure 16. Citizen engagement channels: availability, usage, and effectiveness.



Detailed look at the landscape of **participatory mechanisms in Ukrainian hromadas**, highlighting the gap between **formal availability**, **actual usage**, and **perceived effectiveness**. It underscores a key pattern observed throughout this research: while many participatory tools exist on paper, only a handful are actively used, and even fewer are perceived as impactful by civil society actors.

The most accessible and commonly used mechanisms are those tied to **direct and informal interactions**. **Citizen requests to local self-government bodies** are available in 66.7% of communities and ranked as the most frequently used tool (17.8%). Similarly, **personal and informal contacts with local officials** are available to 59.2% of respondents and are used more often than any other method (30.5%). This confirms that in wartime conditions – when formal deliberation processes may slow down – **informal channels of influence remain a critical entry point** for civic actors. However, their effectiveness is still rated moderately at 10.8-15%.

At the same time, mechanisms that are more structured and participatory in nature – such as **public councils, community self-organization bodies, participatory budgeting, or e-petitions** – have low levels of usage (typically below 7%) and relatively limited perceived effectiveness. For example, although **participatory budgeting** is available in 14.2% of communities, it is used by only 0.8% and seen as effective by just 4.2%. The same is true for **residents' meetings**, **public hearings**, and **online consultations**, which are

often present but rarely activated or trusted. We suppose these trends can be explained due to Martial Law limitation.

Despite these shortcomings, several tools – though not widely used – still received strong effectiveness scores from the few who did engage with them. For instance, **public hearings** are rated at **11.7% effectiveness**, and **local initiatives** and **public councils** both received a 10% effectiveness rating. This suggests that **when these mechanisms are meaningfully implemented**, they can offer valuable spaces for citizen influence but their **visibility, accessibility, and procedural openness remain limited**.

Overall, the chart confirms that **participation in Ukrainian hromadas remains highly reliant on personal networks and ad hoc communication**, rather than institutionalized or inclusive processes. Expanding and institutionalizing effective participatory tools – not just making them available, but actively facilitating their use – could play a vital role in rebuilding local democratic culture during and after the war.

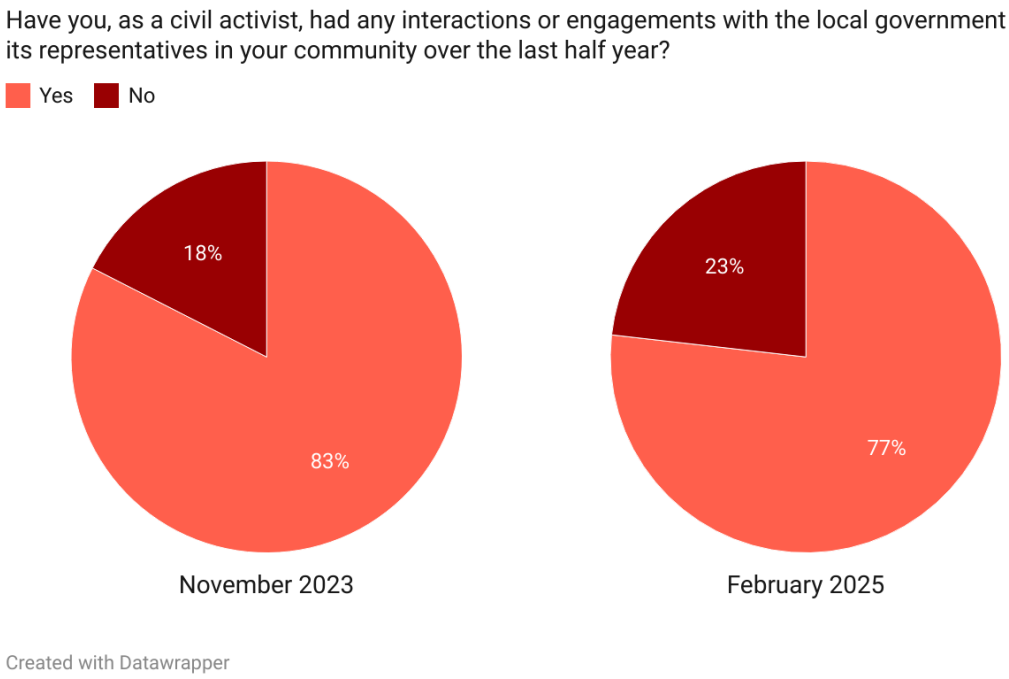
Cooperation and points of conflict

The level of engagement between civil society activists and local self-governments (LSGs) **remains high**, although the most recent data reveals a **slight decline in direct interaction**. In November 2023, **83%** of respondents reported having engaged with local authorities or their representatives over the past six months. By February 2025, this figure decreased modestly to **77%**. While the drop is relatively small, it may reflect changing patterns of participation as both local institutions and civil society actors adapt to a prolonged wartime governance context.

This decline does not necessarily suggest disengagement or growing distance; rather, it may point to a **shift in the nature of civic involvement**. As LSGs became more routinized in their operations and better resourced in managing crisis responses, some interactions that were previously necessary, especially in the form of informal or volunteer-driven coordination, may **now be integrated into more formal mechanisms or delegated to institutional actors**. Moreover, security concerns, bureaucratization, and burnout among activists could also be contributing to the slight reduction in direct contact.

It is also possible that the **initial wave of high engagement** seen in 2022–2023 was partially fueled by the urgency of the invasion's early months, when communities rapidly mobilized to meet emergency needs and relied heavily on horizontal networks and volunteer infrastructure. As these activities transitioned into more structured or programmatic formats, everyday interaction between activists and local officials may have become **less frequent, but more targeted** and formalized. The February 2025 data thus suggests a landscape of civic engagement that is still vibrant, but evolving in form, frequency, and institutional context.

Figure 17. Interactions and engagement of respondents with LSGs.



Open-ended responses reveal a spectrum of experiences - from productive cooperation to persistent conflict. A majority (58 mentions) reported no significant tensions with local authorities, describing either neutral or positive relations.

> *Personally, I had no conflicts with the local authorities. There are always ways to reach an understanding.*

A smaller but substantial group (28 mentions) described positive collaboration with local authorities, often citing successful partnerships on community projects:

> *The community supported our recent initiative to arrange a student space in the (Name of hromada) Lyceum.*

> *Interaction is established, we cooperate. They help **organize events, round tables**, and **meetings**. They respond to our requests and help as much as they can.*

> *I interact with the authorities on a regular basis as a representative of the NGO "Centre of Initiatives in the (Name of hromada)". The authorities always cooperate with us and help us resolve issues.*

> *Cooperated in the joint organisation of meetings of committees and working groups, discussing important issues, finalising draft laws, and making joint comments and additions. There were no conflicts, and cooperation in this area was productive.*

A few respondents (6 mentions) described neutral or rather symbolic relationships – interactions that **were polite but unproductive. Bureaucracy and inefficiency (3 mentions)** were also noted as barriers to constructive engagement.

Conflicts over authorities' refusal to support civil society initiatives were reported in 13 responses. Activists described blocked events, lack of venues for volunteers, or outright indifference:

> *"Refusal to hold charity fairs and other charity events – this is one of the reasons for conflict."*

Corruption and lack of transparency (10 mentions) were also frequently cited as sources of frustration and mistrust. Respondents raised concerns about opaque decisions and the use of public funds without community input.

Tensions over land use and infrastructure projects (8 mentions) highlighted disputes around construction in public or historic spaces and perceived misuse of community resources:

> *"Conflicts regarding the development of green areas and preservation of architectural monuments."*

> *"There were reports of conflicts between activists and local authorities regarding the construction on the historic (Name of the place in hromada) and the improper restoration of the (Name of the place in hromada)."*

Twelve respondents pointed to tensions related to wartime support, particularly when local governments were seen as failing to assist the Armed Forces or community volunteers:

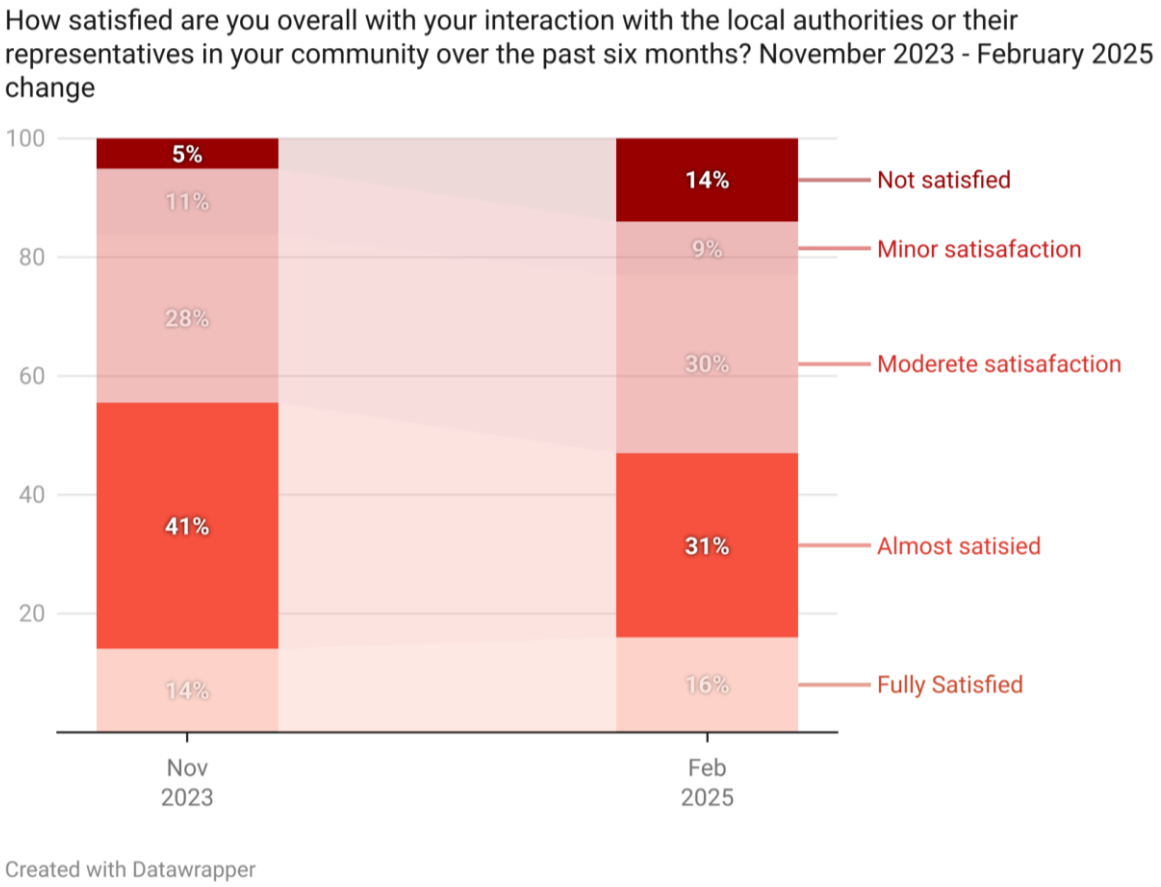
> *"Local authorities do not provide public spaces for volunteer and activist social gatherings."*

Taken together, these findings suggest that while **many activists experience productive cooperation with local governments**, **a significant minority report unresolved conflicts, lack of support, or exclusion from decision-making processes**. These tensions often centered on blocked initiatives and a lack of responsiveness to wartime needs.

Survey data mirrors these findings. Satisfaction with local government interaction remained relatively stable: 55% of respondents in 2023 and 47% in 2025 reported being either "fully" or "almost" satisfied. However, dissatisfaction grew from 16% to 23%, suggesting mounting expectations and strain as wartime conditions persist.

Taken together, these findings reveal a dual reality: while many activists continue to experience positive cooperation with local governments, a significant minority report frustration, exclusion, or weakened trust. These tensions often center around transparency, access to decision-making, and wartime responsiveness.

Figure 18. Interaction with local authorities.

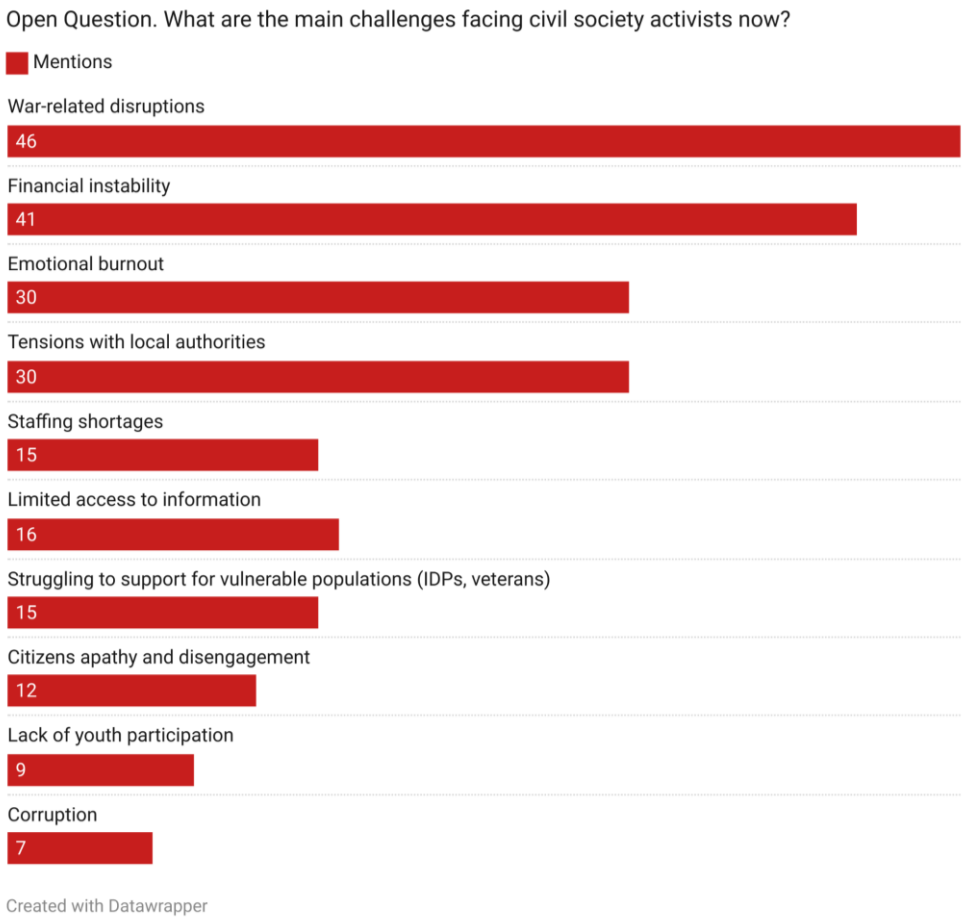


Even where cooperation exists, civil society faces systemic challenges. The following section unpacks the broader pressures and constraints limiting civic activism in Ukraine's hromadas.

Barriers to Civic Engagement

Civil society in Ukraine continues to operate under immense strain. Activists face a complex mix of war-related disruption, institutional barriers, and resource scarcity, all of which hinder sustained civic engagement.

Figure 19. Activist main challenges.



The most frequently cited problem is **financial instability** (41 mentions). Activists struggle to secure stable funding, often relying on one-time grants or donor contributions to keep their projects running. Many describe the difficulty of maintaining even basic operations in the absence of core support. As one respondent summarized: *"All initiatives run into a lack of funds for their implementation".* Others cited a lack of educational opportunities, difficulties in reporting, and low levels of community engagement as compounding factors.

The **war itself** poses a significant barrier to activism (46 mentions). The threat of missile attacks, disruption of logistics, and widespread conscription severely limit the ability to plan and carry out long-term projects. In some cases, organizations have **lost key staff members to military service or displacement**, making continuity of work extremely difficult.

Emotional burnout emerged as a central theme (30 mentions), with activists reporting high levels of stress, psychological exhaustion, and demoralization. Several responses mentioned that team members are working overtime, under intense pressure, and often without recognition or adequate support. As one activist put it, *"The biggest challenge is burnout due to the heavy workload."*

Staffing shortages were also noted (15 mentions), with many communities experiencing a drain of active young people and skilled professionals due to migration or relocation to safer areas. Respondents observed a shrinking pool of volunteers and leaders, which in turn makes project implementation harder and slows momentum.

Tensions also arise in **relations with local authorities** (30 mentions). Activists report that some municipal governments are indifferent, uncooperative, or even obstructive. While some communities foster collaboration, others impose bureaucratic hurdles or dismiss civic initiatives outright. A few respondents explicitly cited *"local authorities that slow down many processes"* or *"a purely formal approach"* from government actors.

Limited access to information (16 mentions) further complicates civic work. Wartime restrictions, state secrecy, and selective communication have left activists feeling excluded from local decision-making processes. Some cited a *"closed nature of government branches"* and an absence of clear mechanisms for citizen influence.

Support for vulnerable populations remains a persistent challenge (15 mentions), particularly for IDPs, veterans, and military personnel. Respondents described struggling to meet growing humanitarian needs, including shelter and psychosocial support, especially as fighting intensifies near their communities.

Corruption was also raised (7 mentions), with respondents referencing power abuses and a sense of impunity among officials. Others pointed to broader **public disengagement** (12 mentions), including general apathy and lack of youth participation (9 mentions). The outmigration of young people, emotional fatigue, and declining motivation among residents were described as barriers to broader community involvement.

Together, these responses portray a civil society that remains active and resilient, but is **under continuous pressure**. Financial precarity, psychological strain and the war's direct impact have created a **fragile operating environment**. Yet despite these conditions, many activists **continue to push forward,** highlighting both the vulnerabilities and the strength of Ukraine's civic infrastructure in wartime.

Activists report that in many Ukrainian hromadas, the ability of citizens to express disagreement with local government decisions is significantly limited - not necessarily due to the complete absence of formal mechanisms, but because existing tools are often ineffective, symbolic, or inaccessible. Structural barriers, poor communication, low transparency, and a lack of institutional responsiveness undermine meaningful civic input.

In response to the question, *"Do you believe your hromada provides sufficient mechanisms for residents to express disagreement with decisions made by local authorities?"*, **52 out of 121 activists (43%)** said **no**, **such mechanisms do not exist in their community**. These respondents were then asked to describe what exactly is missing. Their answers reveal significant concerns about non-responsiveness, lack of transparency, inadequate communication, and the absence of platforms for feedback and public dialogue.

The most frequently cited issue was the **lack of effective communication channels between authorities and residents** (16 mentions). Respondents noted that public consultations are rare or superficial, with little follow-up on community input:

> *"Absolutely insufficient public hearings and discussions on important and strategic issues."*

> *"There are no platforms to voice opinions with feedback on criticism."*

> *Even independent media are almost absent – there's no real dialogue.*

Relatedly, concerns over **transparency and accountability** were raised 12 times. Respondents noted limited access to information, opaque budget processes, and top-down decision-making:

> *Transparency is lacking, and nepotism prevails.*

> *Even when hearings take place, their outcomes are ignored.*

Some described **existing mechanisms as ineffective in practice** (4 mentions). Petition tools and civic councils exist but are often symbolic:

> *Petitions get enough votes and are still ignored.*

> *The mechanisms don't work, especially since the war shifted priorities.*

There were also concerns about the **absence of oversight** (8 mentions). Even when residents provide feedback, they rarely see results:

> *We have public councils, but there's no follow-up on residents' suggestions.*

> *We need mechanisms to monitor how decisions are implemented.*

Respondents also cited a **lack of support for civic initiatives** (7 mentions), with many calling for better engagement with NGOs and volunteer groups:

> *Local authorities don't support community groups – there's no infrastructure to help them grow.*

Low public awareness (5 mentions) and a **lack of digital tools** (4 mentions) further limit engagement. Several activists called for civic education and user-friendly online tools:

> *Our community lacks educational programs to help people influence decisions.*

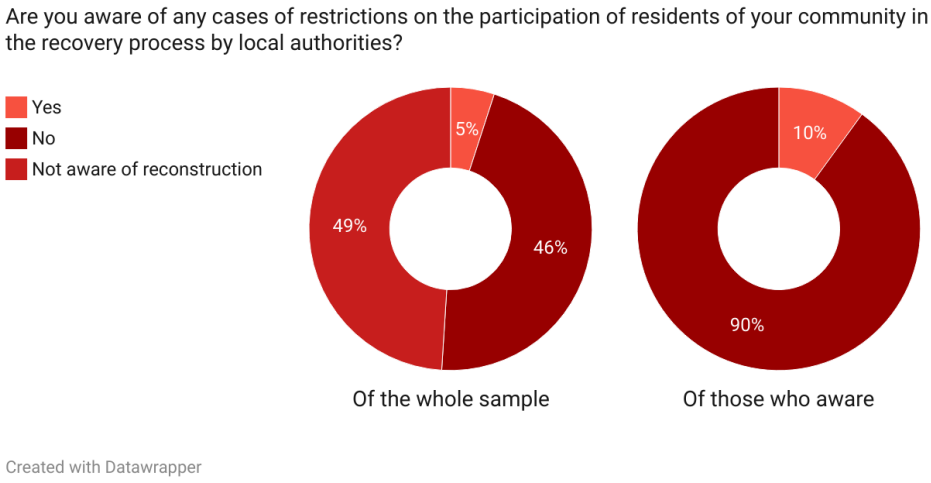
> *“ Social media comments get deleted – there’s no online dialogue. ”*

Finally, financial constraints (3 mentions) were cited as a barrier to creating or maintaining participation tools:

> *“ We can barely cover basic needs, let alone fund participatory infrastructure. ”*

Challenges connected with the Local Authority

Figure 20. Awareness of participation restrictions in recovery



The data suggests that **restrictions on participation in reconstruction are rare**. Among those who are aware of recovery processes in their hromadas, **90% report no limitations** on resident involvement, while only 10% mention any cases of restricted participation. This indicates that, where recovery efforts are visible, they are generally perceived as open and procedurally inclusive.

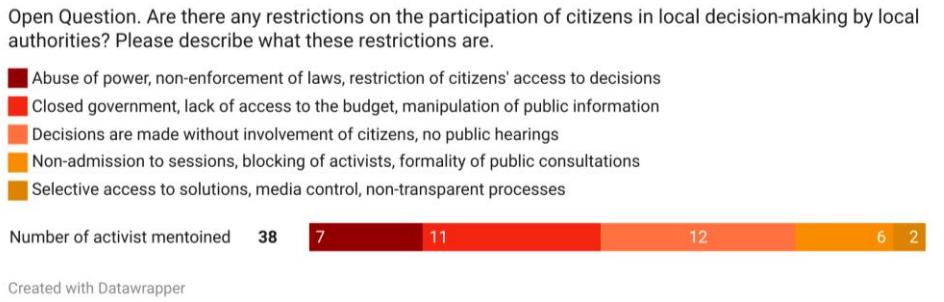
However, a significant portion of respondents – **49% of the total sample** – say they are **not aware of any reconstruction taking place** in their communities. This does not necessarily point to exclusion, but rather reflects a broader reality: **in many hromadas, large-scale reconstruction efforts may not have started yet**. Ongoing warfare, limited financial and material resources, and proximity to active frontline zones likely delay or prevent recovery planning in affected areas.

The key takeaway is that while **restrictions are not a major issue**, the **low visibility or absence of reconstruction activities** in many hromadas creates a participation gap by default. As recovery accelerates, ensuring transparent communication and proactive civic engagement will be essential to building inclusive post-war governance.

Participation challenges

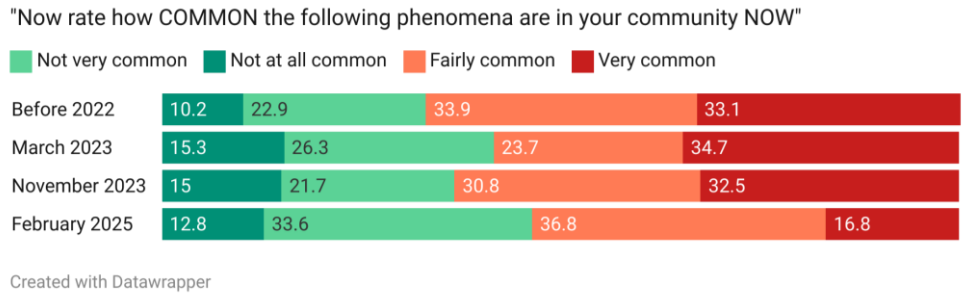
From open questions we also see that the main challenges to citizen engagement from LSG perspective are **low trust in the authorities, lack of awareness of opportunities for participation, politicisation of civic participation, security restrictions during the war, and changes in the population structure that make the usual practices less effective**.

Figure 21. Restriction on participation in the community



Despite these challenges, **perceptions of corruption appear to be improving**. Compared to early 2023, far fewer respondents in 2025 considered local corruption "very common" (down from 34.7% to 16.8%). Those who said corruption in their hromada was not common ("not at all common" and "not very common") rose to 46.4% from 33.1%. This positive shift likely reflects improved administrative procedures, more structured governance, and stronger civic pressure – especially following public campaigns like "Money for the Army," which increased scrutiny of local budgets and defense-related spending.

Figure 22. Figure 20. Perception of corruption in the community.



Several factors likely contribute to this shift. First, as local authorities moved from emergency response toward more structured wartime governance, many improved administrative routines, **procurement processes, and communication strategies**. The earlier, highly visible moments of chaos – when citizens witnessed uncoordinated aid flows or uneven distribution – were replaced by better-organized and institutionalized procedures. Additionally, civic oversight likely played a critical role: mass mobilizations and public pressure campaigns such as the **"Money for the Army" protests** in major Ukrainian cities throughout 2023 drew attention to financial mismanagement and **demanded stricter accountability from local officials** (Fornusek 2023). These protests did not just criticize local authorities – they also tried to **reshape norms** around transparency and responsiveness, pushing many LSGs to adjust how they report on budgets, procurement, and military-related expenditures (Hatsko and Darkovich 2024).

Importantly, this change in perception does not mean corruption has been eradicated, but rather that it may have become less visible, less disruptive, or that local governments have been more successful in managing expectations and building trust. Citizens may now distinguish between emergency improvisation and systemic abuse, leading to more nuanced assessments. Overall, the 2025 data points to a maturing relationship between civil society and local government – one that is still marked by scrutiny, but increasingly grounded in stability and mutual accountability.

When Barriers Become Deliberate: Suppression and Exclusion

In some hromadas, however, these issues go further – activists describe not just passive neglect, but active suppression of civic participation. Among respondents who believe that limitations are intentionally created by local governments - not simply a result of wartime necessity – a pattern of exclusion, manipulation, and institutional opacity emerges.

About **one-third of surveyed activists (35%) believe there are barriers to citizen participation** in local decision-making. Among them, **nearly half (22% of all respondents) attribute these restrictions directly to the actions of local authorities**. Their responses point to artificially constructed obstacles that limit transparency, suppress dissent, and undermine meaningful engagement.

The most frequently cited issue was the **disregard for public opinion** (12 mentions). Respondents reported that decisions are made behind closed doors, without citizen input, and that even when public consultations do occur, they are often symbolic:

> *“Any decisions are made without involving citizens – they’re just published after the fact.”*

> *“Public input is ignored, and citizens are not asked anything.”*

> *“Even those with disabilities are rarely included in public discussions or civic councils.”*

Closely related were complaints about a **lack of transparency and access to information** (11 mentions). Many activists highlighted the opaque nature of local decision-making, where budget allocations, council agendas, or draft policies are either undisclosed or manipulated:

> *“There is no public access to budget information, development plans, or expenditures.”*

> *“Petitions are removed or blocked if they concern the budget or construction issues.”*

> *Sessions are scheduled with minimal notice, and proposals are hidden.*

Some respondents (7 mentions) pointed to **violations of citizens' rights or abuses of authority**. These include procedural violations, censorship, or use of legal ambiguities to limit participation:

> *City council sessions are held in a 'hybrid' format with unclear legal status – potentially invalidating decisions.*

> *They use martial law as a pretext to delay responses and sideline citizen input.*

> *Critical comments on social media are deleted, and unfriendly media are denied access.*

Direct restrictions on civic presence and input were also noted (6 mentions). Respondents described being blocked from attending public meetings, or facing artificial barriers to joining advisory bodies:

> *Citizens are deliberately kept out of sessions – only select individuals, who nod in agreement, are invited.*

> *There is no civic council at all – no way to get involved formally.*

> *Civic bodies exist, but active residents are excluded.*

Finally, a few activists (2 mentions) highlighted **corruption and political bias** as enabling these practices, with loyal media and civil society groups used to simulate civic engagement:

> *Local governments use loyal NGOs and control media spaces to create the illusion of participation.*

> *Only friendly media are invited to press briefings, and social media comments that disagree with officials are deleted.*

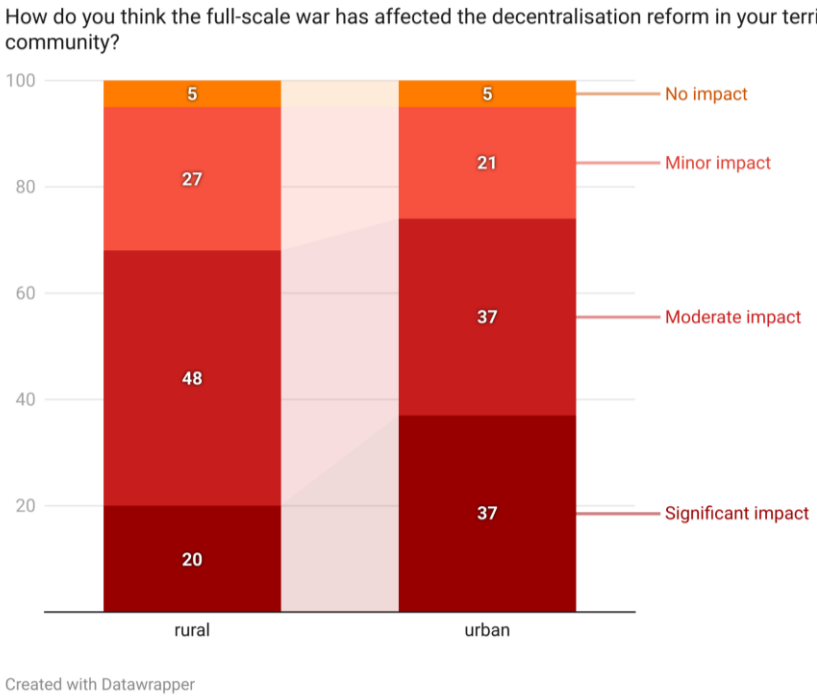
4. Decentralization Reform and Mechanisms of Polycentric Governance as key components of Local Governance functioning Ukraine

4.1. War and Martial impact on Decentralisation reform

Concerns about the future of decentralisation reform in Ukraine have grown considerably since the start of the full-scale invasion (Darkovich and Savisko 2024). Once seen as one of the country's flagship democratic achievements, decentralisation is now perceived by many civic actors and analysts as under threat – if not in principle, then in practice. The wartime centralisation of power, resources, and decision-making has raised fears that the momentum of reform could stall or be reversed. In public discussions, especially among local stakeholders, questions are increasingly raised about whether Ukraine's commitment to local self-governance can be sustained under the pressures of wartime governance and post-war reconstruction.

Recent survey data suggest that **the war's impact on decentralisation is felt by activists at the local level**. In both rural and urban hromadas, the majority of activists say that the war has had either a **moderate or significant impact** on decentralisation processes. While **rural areas show slightly lower intensity in reporting "significant impact",** the overall perception of disruption is high across the board. Only a small minority of respondents believe that the war has had no effect on the reform.

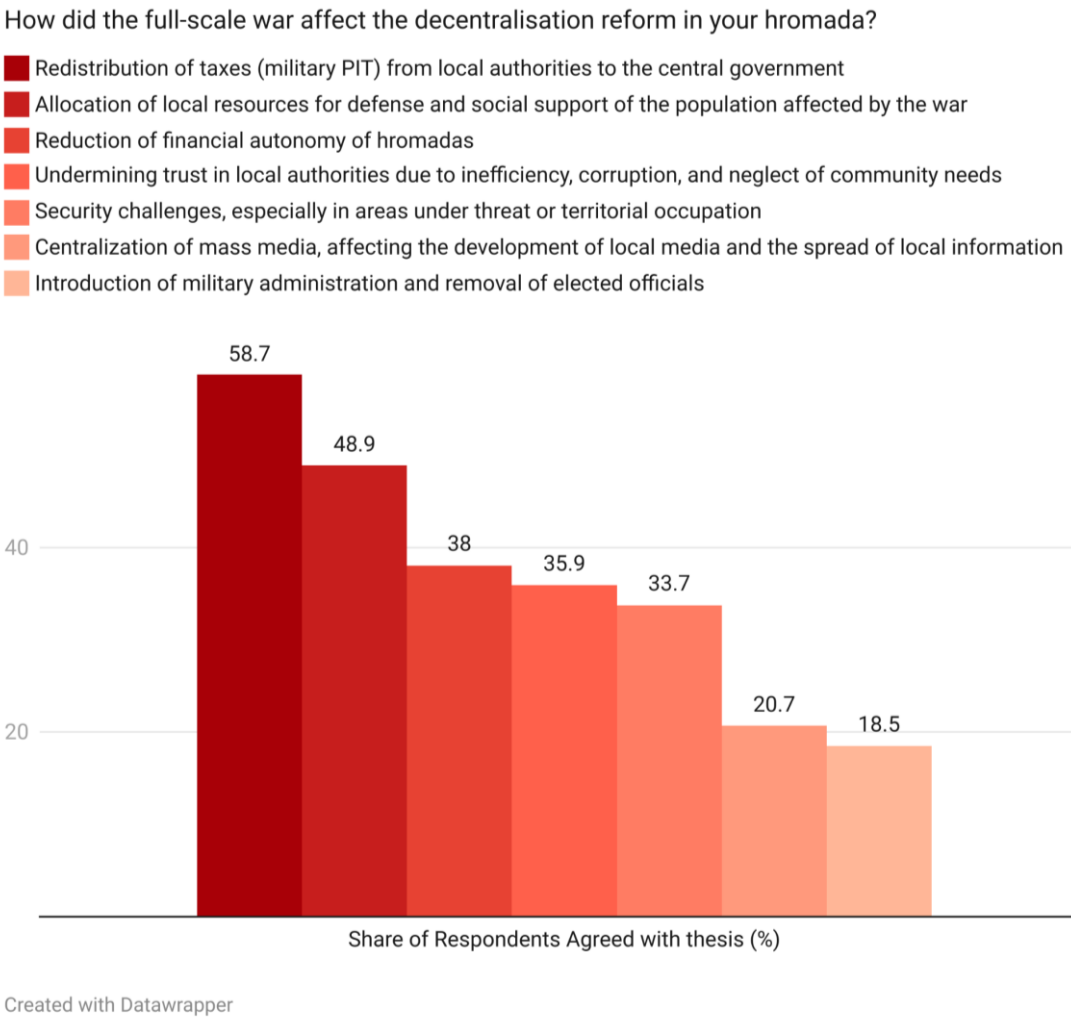
Figure 23. War impact on decentralisation.



Further insight is provided by the breakdown of specific mechanisms through which respondents believe decentralisation has been affected. The most frequently cited impact – agreed with by **nearly 59% of respondents** – is the **redistribution of taxes (especially the military PIT) from local to central authorities**, which is seen as undermining the financial autonomy of hromadas. Closely following this are concerns about the **reallocation of local resources for defense and social support** (48.9%) and the **general reduction in financial independence** (38%). These findings confirm that local actors are especially sensitive to the fiscal dimensions of decentralisation.

Respondents also report a range of institutional and political disruptions. Over a third believe the war has led to **declining trust in local authorities**, driven by perceptions of inefficiency or mismanagement. Others highlight the **centralisation of information flows**, especially in media, and note that the wartime environment has limited citizen influence and civic oversight. Although **only 18.5% report the introduction of military administrations or removal of elected officials** in their hromadas, this figure remains notable – indicating that direct interruptions of democratic local governance have occurred in some areas.

Figure 24. Full-scale war affect the decentralization.



While these limitations are real and widely perceived, they **should not necessarily be interpreted as a full reversal of decentralisation**. Many of the constraints reported – especially the reallocation of financial resources and centralisation of certain decision-

making powers – are **functional and necessary adjustments under wartime conditions**. The redirection of military PIT from local budgets to national defense priorities, for example, reflects the urgent need to support Ukraine's military functioning, rather than a rejection of local self-governance (Piddubnyi, Tytiuk, and Darkovich 2023). In this sense, the **temporary centralisation of resources and authority is a wartime measure**, not a dismantling of the decentralisation reform.

Importantly, **the legal and institutional foundations of decentralisation remain intact**. There have been no formal legal rollbacks of local autonomy or fiscal decentralisation, and local governments continue to operate, provide services, and coordinate humanitarian and defense-related tasks. The constitutional and legislative framework that underpins decentralisation is still in place, and the general political consensus in support of local self-government has not eroded. What the data suggests is not a collapse of the reform, but rather a **stress test of its flexibility and resilience** – a test it continues to withstand despite unprecedented challenges.

Our research data show that decentralisation remains in place, but faces **obstacles provided by the war**. **Possible further centralisation of fiscal resources, administrative functions, and communications** – even if temporary – can disrupt the balance of governance in ways that risk becoming entrenched. Addressing these concerns in the **post-war recovery phase will be essential to restoring and advancing the decentralisation agenda.**

4.2. Polycentric Governance in Practice: Mobilization, Innovation, and Community Knowledge

The Role of Polycentric Governance in Wartime Resilience

The inclusion of **polycentric governance analysis in this report is driven by its relevance to understanding local and societal resilience during wartime**. Ukraine's decentralized governance structure, significantly reformed /through its decentralization agenda since 2014, has created a unique landscape for local self-government. The full-scale invasion of Russia in 2022 has **tested the durability and adaptability** of these local institutions under extreme pressure. In this context, **evaluating the mechanisms of polycentric governance** provides a lens to assess not only **how local governments manage crisis response** but also how they **adapt, innovate, and collaborate with civic actors**. Our objective as authors of this report is to frame the discussion of local governance in Ukraine within the theoretical constructs of polycentricity, highlighting both its successes and its areas for improvement as crucial determinants of community resilience.

Polycentric governance in Ukraine, as conceptualized by Keudel and Huss (2023), identifies three essential mechanisms that support resilient local governance: **mobilisation of local resources**, **facilitation of local knowledge**, and **experimentation and innovation**. Unlike hierarchical governance models, polycentric systems distribute authority across multiple actors, allowing for localized decision-making, mutual learning, and adaptive problem-solving. In the warrtime context of Ukraine, these mechanisms are not just abstract concepts; they are practical tools for maintaining governance functionality amidst chaos. Mobilisation of local resources has enabled communities to activate volunteer networks, reallocate budgets, and coordinate humanitarian aid swiftly. The facilitation of local knowledge has allowed community-driven insights to influence recovery strategies, while experimentation and innovation have spurred localized

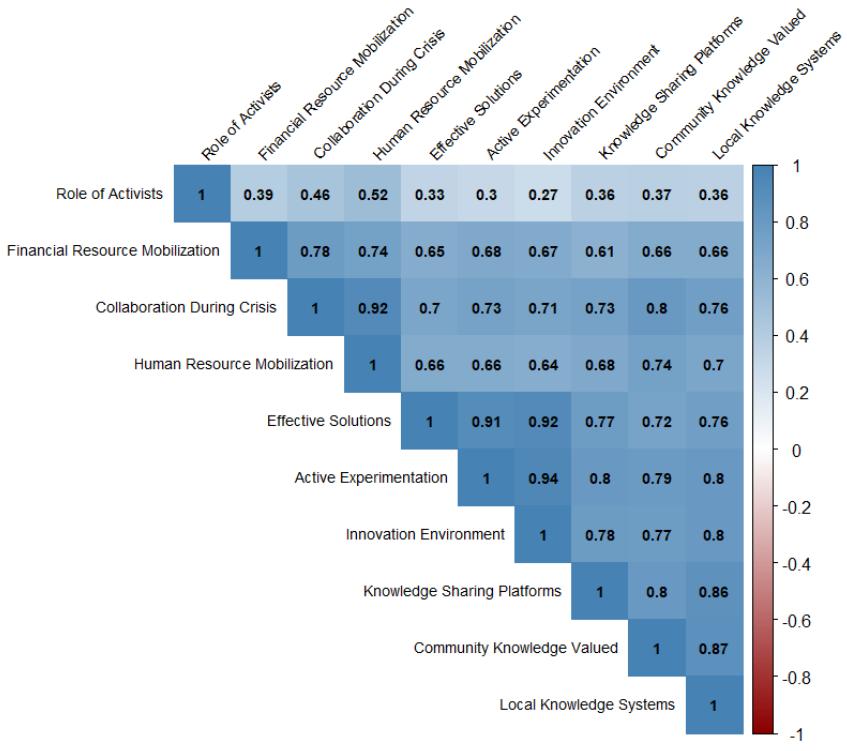
solutions to infrastructural and logistical challenges. These polycentric mechanisms have contributed to sustaining local governance and civic participation during the most intense periods of conflict.

Despite these positive developments, the implementation of polycentric governance mechanisms remains uneven across Ukrainian hromadas. Our analysis seeks to identify the specific conditions under which these mechanisms thrive or falter. By doing so, we aim to provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing polycentric practices, scaling successful innovations, and addressing gaps where local knowledge is underutilized or where resource mobilization is insufficient. The following sections will present empirical findings from 40 Ukrainian hromadas, examining how these communities have engaged with polycentric governance mechanisms in practice. We aim to demonstrate that strengthening these local capacities is not merely a response to wartime pressures but a pathway to long-term resilience and sustainable governance in post-war Ukraine.

Assessing the Reliability of Polycentric Governance Scale

To empirically capture **polycentric governance** mechanisms, we constructed a **10-item scale** encompassing indicators across the three domains. However, based on item-level reliability analysis, we excluded *Role of Activists in Crisis Response*, which showed weaker internal coherence with the other items in the resource mobilisation dimension. This yielded a **final 9-item scale** that demonstrates **excellent internal consistency** (Cronbach's α = **0.97**). The average inter-item correlation is **0.75**, and all items exhibit strong item-total correlations (all *r.drop* > 0.76). Removing any additional item did not improve reliability, suggesting that the remaining items form a **well-integrated and coherent measurement** of local governance capacity.

Figure 25. Correlation matrix of polycentric governance mechanisms.



This supports the interpretation that Ukrainian hromadas' ability to mobilise resources, integrate local knowledge, and promote innovation reflects a **stable, multidimensional construct** of governance capacity under crisis conditions.

We also examined the reliability of the three underlying dimensions separately:

- **Crisis resource mobilization.** The original 4-item scale – comprising *Financial Resource Mobilization*, *Collaboration During Crisis*, *Human Resource Mobilization*, and *Role of Activists in Crisis Response*-showed good reliability (α = **0.88**), but the last item reduced internal coherence. Removing it increased Cronbach's alpha to **0.93** and the average inter-item correlation from **0.63** to **0.81**, indicating that *Role of Activists in Crisis Response* may reflect a distinct construct-such as **external civic engagement-**rather than internal mobilisation efforts led by local authorities.

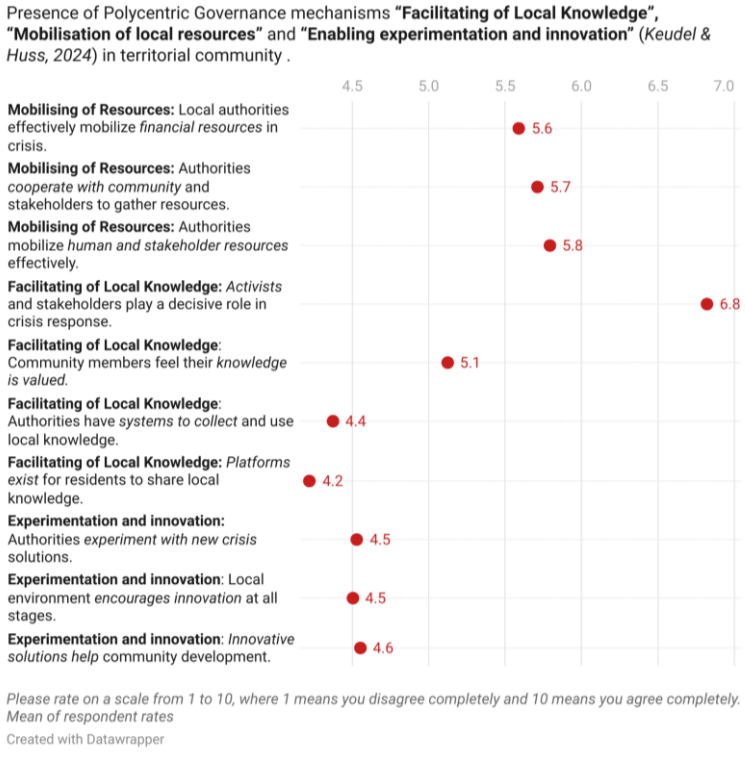
- **Facilitating Local knowledge.** The three items: *Community Knowledge Valued*, *Local Knowledge Systems*, and *Platforms for Sharing Knowledge* – formed a highly reliable scale (α = **0.94**, average inter-item correlation = **0.84**). All items contributed meaningfully and consistently.

- **Innovation & experimentation.** The dimension assessing innovation capacity-*Active Experimentation*, *Innovation-Friendly Environment*, and *Effectiveness of Innovative Solutions* – also demonstrated very high internal consistency (α = **0.97**) and strong inter-item alignment (average *r* = **0.92**, all *r.drop* > 0.93).

These findings confirm that both the **overall scale** and its **three subdimensions** provide reliable measures of polycentric governance practices in Ukraine's local governments under wartime stress.

Polycentric Governance Core Patterns

Figure 26. Polycentric governance mechanisms.



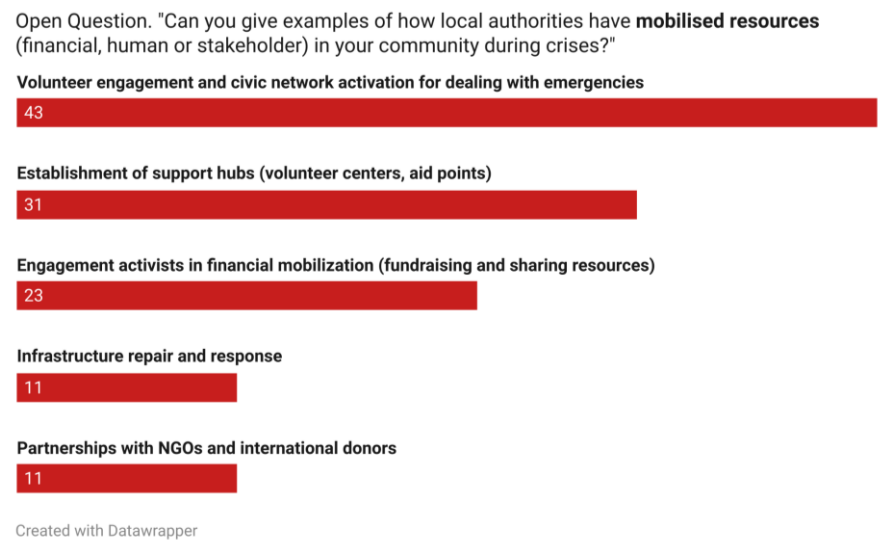
Survey results indicate that Ukrainian hromadas have made **efforts in mobilizing core elements of polycentric governance**, particularly in resource activation and civic collaboration. Respondents gave the highest rating – **6.8 out of 10** – to the statement that **civic activists and stakeholders played a decisive role in local crisis response**. This affirms that communities across Ukraine are not simply passive recipients of aid or policy; they are co-creators of local solutions, often filling critical roles in emergency management and social support. Similarly, both **financial mobilisation (5.6)** and **human/stakeholder mobilisation (5.8)** received strong marks, underscoring the success of local governments in volunteer networks and partnerships to meet urgent needs.

The data also reflects a **growing foundation for innovation and inclusive governance**, even if some mechanisms are still developing. While ratings for **facilitation of local knowledge** and **institutionalized innovation practices** were lower (ranging from 4.2 to 5.1), they point to **emerging efforts and untapped potential**. Notably, the **5.1 average score** for the perception **that community knowledge is valued** by local authorities may actually be considered a relatively good mark, especially in light of traditionally low ratings that activists tend to give to local government responsiveness. For example, many communities have already begun experimenting with participatory strategy-making, civic hubs, and youth initiatives – even if these practices are not yet systematized. The relatively lower scores likely reflect not a lack of intent, but a need for **greater visibility, structure, and scaling** of promising grassroots approaches.

What stands out in this wartime context is the **resilience and adaptability of local governance**. Despite extraordinary constraints – security threats, resource scarcity, institutional stress – hromadas have been able to **activate networks of trust, engage citizens in meaningful ways, and maintain functionality under pressure**. These conditions form fertile ground for deepening polycentric practices in the future. As the war continues and the post-war recovery agenda comes into focus, supporting communities in **consolidating these gains – by building platforms for knowledge sharing, formalizing innovation pathways, and integrating civic input – will be key to democratic resilience** and sustainable development.

Local Resource Mobilization During Crisis: What Activists Observe

Figure 27. Local resource mobilization during crisis.



Open-ended responses reveal that in the face of the crisis, many local governments actively mobilized financial, human, and organizational resources.

Respondents most commonly described **local fundraising initiatives** aimed at supporting the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU), responding to emergencies, or addressing urgent social needs (23 mentions). These efforts included organizing charity events, coordinating donations, and working closely with local businesses and civic actors. As one activist noted: *"Gatherings of entrepreneurs, businesses, and civic activists are held to collect the necessary resources."* Others referred to auctions and local campaigns in support of the AFU and war-affected residents.

Volunteer engagement and the activation of civic networks were another major dimension of resource mobilization (43 mentions). Local authorities often relied on the involvement of citizens to respond to missile strikes or other emergencies. In these cases, human resources – including volunteers, local employees, and community groups – were mobilized to support clean-up, assistance, and recovery. One respondent stated: *"People help municipal institutions at the sites of missile strikes in dealing with disruptions".*

Many communities also **established support hubs** such as volunteer centers and humanitarian aid distribution points (31 mentions). These were used to deliver assistance to displaced persons, residents affected by shelling, and vulnerable groups. Respondents cited the provision of food, clothes, shelter, and psychological support as key elements of the local response.

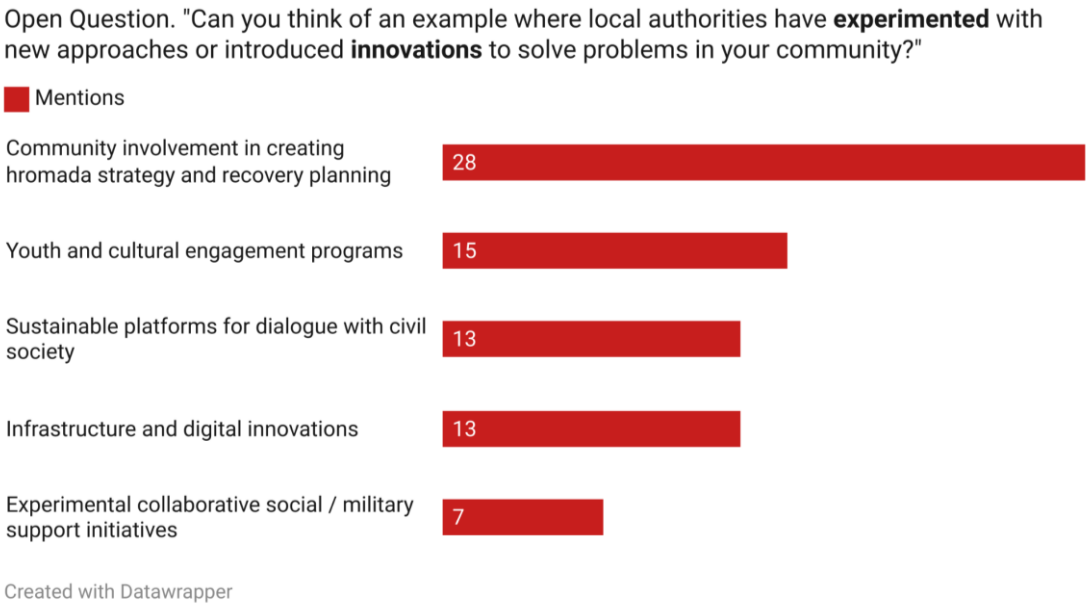
Infrastructure repair efforts were mentioned by 11 respondents, who pointed to swift action by local authorities to restore damaged housing, educational institutions, and utility systems. For example: *"Shelters at the lyceum were repaired, and flooding consequences were addressed."*

Partnerships with NGOs and international donors (11 mentions) were also highlighted. Respondents valued the ability of some local governments to attract external support and coordinate with charitable foundations and aid agencies. One noted: *"Our local government has learned how to attract international organizations to support the population."*

Taken together, these responses show that local resource mobilization during crises is understood by activists as a combination of financial flexibility, civic engagement, humanitarian coordination, infrastructure response, and donor collaboration.

Innovation and Experimentation: How Local Authorities Engage Community Ideas

Figure 28. Innovation and experimentation.



When asked to share examples of how local authorities have experimented with new approaches or implemented innovations to solve local problems, many respondents struggled to identify clear cases. **A majority (64 mentions) said they had not observed such efforts in their community or were unaware of any**. This suggests that either innovative practices are still rare, or that existing innovations are not being effectively communicated to the public.

At the same time, **63 respondents shared examples of experimentation and innovation**, revealing that in some communities, local authorities are indeed testing new ways of working – often by incorporating community knowledge, building platforms for collaboration, or launching small-scale pilots.

One of the most frequently mentioned innovations involved **engaging residents in strategic planning and recovery processes (28 mentions)**. In these cases, local governments invited community members to co-create development strategies, submit ideas for recovery programs, or take part in public consultations:

> “ *Inviting people to participate in the creation of the Community Strategy.* ”

> “ *Yes, during the development of the Strategy and the Comprehensive Recovery Program for (Name of the city).* ”

> “ *A training session on writing the community development strategy.* ”

Another area where new approaches emerged was **collaborative work on social policy and support for the Armed Forces (7 mentions)** – often reflecting the wartime context in which civil society and government had to adapt quickly to new needs.

Some communities have gone further, establishing **permanent platforms for dialogue with civil society organizations**. These include municipal hubs, partnership councils, and advisory boards where community actors can raise proposals and shape local decisions:

> *“There is a communication platform for this in the community. The ‘Misto Zmistiv’ hub, where any organization can organize an event and citizens can attend.”*

> *“The local authorities created a platform for public organizations – the ‘Misto Zmistiv’ Hub. We have a partnership council with the City Council.”*

> *“The creation of the Accessibility Council. This involves engaging experts and civic activists… and developing an accessibility strategy with their input.”*

In the area of infrastructure and public space improvements (13 mentions), several activists reported that local initiatives from residents led to concrete results:

> *“Improvement of a children’s space. Local residents proposed transforming an abandoned area into a children’s space. The authorities allocated funds and organized the work.”*

Finally, **youth and cultural programs (15 mentions)** were also seen as spaces for innovation – often through creative competitions, cultural festivals, or inclusive events aimed at engaging underrepresented groups:

> *“The community has introduced a festival of creativity for people with disabilities - the team members showed how to interact and what is needed for this.”*

> *“An annual initiative contest is held among the community’s youth called ‘Active Youth’.”*

Overall, the data reveal that while **systematic innovation is not yet widespread**, many communities are **experimenting with new participatory mechanisms and targeted initiatives**, especially in strategy-making, inclusion, and civic engagement.

For activists, innovation is often interpreted not as high-tech solutions or formal reform, but as **any shift that allows community voices to shape decisions, address local needs creatively, and overcome institutional inertia**. Supporting and scaling these bottom-up practices could strengthen trust and resilience at the local level.

Facilitating Local Knowledge

When asked to provide examples of local authorities utilizing community knowledge or ideas to solve problems or enhance public services, many respondents highlighted specific cases of collaboration, though systematic efforts remain uneven.

The most frequently mentioned practice involves the **creation of formal dialogue platforms**, such as communication hubs, advisory councils, or regular public consultations. For instance, respondents noted the effectiveness of platforms like the "Misto Zmistiv Hub", a municipal facility designed explicitly to enable community organizations to organize events and address socially significant issues together with local authorities. As one respondent described, *"The local authorities created a platform for public organizations – the 'Misto Zmistiv Hub'. We have a partnership council with the City Council, where we jointly discuss pressing community issues."*

Strategic planning and policy development processes frequently involve community inputs. Respondents cited community participation in designing development strategies and comprehensive recovery plans, illustrating structured mechanisms through which local knowledge informs policymaking. One respondent provided a vivid example: *"Inviting people to participate in creating the Community Strategy",* while another emphasized practical collaboration: *"A training session on writing the community development strategy".*

Activists also highlighted instances where authorities directly implemented **community-initiated proposals for infrastructure improvements and public spaces**. Examples include transforming abandoned spaces into child-friendly areas or installing modular shelters in response to resident suggestions. One respondent described an impactful initiative: *"Local residents proposed transforming an abandoned area into a children's space. Authorities allocated funds and organized the work."* Another pointed to safety initiatives inspired by resident proposals: *"Residents suggested installing a modular shelter, and the authorities responded positively and set it up in the neighborhood."*

In addition, activists reported significant **cooperation on social and veteran policy**, reflecting wartime priorities. Community input has led to innovative policy measures, such as Ukraine's first veteran-focused local policy framework, developed with active engagement from experts and local activists: *"Thanks to activists and their expertise, a veteran policy was created – the first in Ukraine of its kind."*

Overall, activists perceive the facilitation of local knowledge not necessarily as technological or bureaucratic innovations but as concrete opportunities for meaningful involvement in governance. These initiatives demonstrate how community insights can effectively influence local decision-making, improve public services, and respond directly to residents' needs. Scaling such practices could further strengthen community trust, resilience, and effectiveness in local governance.

5. Qualitative Insights from the Activist Focus Group

To supplement the quantitative survey data with deeper qualitative insights, a focus group was conducted with seven activists selected from the initial survey pool. This approach was chosen specifically to explore sensitive and nuanced topics such as funding challenges, administrative barriers, interactions with authorities, future anxieties under potential crisis scenarios, and personal motivations – areas where interactive discussion can yield richer understanding than structured questionnaires alone. The group setting facilitated the sharing of experiences and allowed for probing follow-up questions, providing valuable context to the broader survey findings.

Participants were deliberately chosen to represent a geographical cross-section of active regions within Ukraine: two activists were from the West, two from the North, and three from the South. The group also reflected varied organizational maturity, with six participants representing established NGOs and one leading a less formalized civic initiative. Their professional backgrounds were diverse (including teachers and lawyers, among others), and their engagement models varied, encompassing both full-time activists and individuals contributing on a voluntary basis alongside separate full-time employment. This diversity within the small group ensured a range of perspectives on the core issues facing the civic sector.

Block 1: Challenges, Resources, Communication, and Interaction

Delving into the operational realities faced by activists, the focus group explored the critical challenges, available resources, and interaction dynamics that shape their daily work. Participants highlighted several interconnected difficulties impacting their initiatives, alongside the adaptive strategies they employ to navigate them.

Financial and Human Resources

A primary challenge is the **lack of stable funding**. Activists operate in a precarious environment reliant on grant schemes (often international) or volunteering. Funding instability directly threatens project viability, as illustrated by participants whose projects were halted due to withdrawn funds: "...civic activists in the [Name of a city] currently receive no funding at all for public investigations. ...in fact, investigations have been halted," and "The project that was supposed to start with the support of the [Name] project – we received a stop command. We had to return 8.8 million UAH." This unpredictability forces constant adaptation.

Small, rural communities face financial marginalization, often excluded from donor funding due to population size or perceived priority: "...you wrote a great grant... but your population is too small." This exacerbates existing inequalities.

Despite funding gaps, activists demonstrate resourcefulness, utilizing humanitarian aid ("We won a grant and renovated a facility for orphaned children. We receive many grants, but not monetary – these are food packages, hygiene kits..."), personal funds ("We maintain

the office at our own expense, and use a personal vehicle"), business connections, alternative agreements ("We periodically sign memorandums with various organizations..."), and hybrid models combining grants with local budgets ("A police station was opened with the support of UNDP and EU grant funds... local budgets were also involved").

There is widespread criticism of the state's limited role as a funder, with perceptions of bias towards politically connected groups: "We would like the support to come not only from donors... but for the state to also pay attention to this," and "There is funding for civic organizations from the local budget, but only for pocket organizations..."

Human resource shortages are equally critical. Participants universally cited a **lack of people, particularly those with specialized skills** like analytics: "There are never enough people, never enough qualified people," and "When it comes to analytics, I don't see any volunteer analysts. Maybe you've heard of some?" Activists often compensate by taking on multiple roles ("I had to learn everything from scratch... doing everything alone") or forming cooperative networks ("We have an alliance of sensible civic organizations... We unite and then carry out projects together"). The ongoing war and mobilization significantly destabilize teams: "Two of our key experts are in the Armed Forces. I myself could be drafted at any moment." Despite this, activists emphasize continuous learning "on the go": "We are learning... we're teaching ourselves everything."

Psychological and Administrative Resources

Constant stress, amplified by war and workload, depletes psychological resources: "We are currently living in a state of constant stress... Especially when your child has been at the front for three years – it's very hard for me." Coping mechanisms include self-regulation techniques (sports, games: "I play football at least once a week... I play board games..."), retreats ("We organized a retreat... spent a whole week there, where we had the chance to speak with psychotherapists"), and even technology ("ChatGPT... sometimes it helps just to talk"). However, **seeking professional help faces stigma in smaller communities:** "If people find out that [someone] goes to a psychologist – it would be a reputational loss." Peer support and informal strategies are crucial.

Administrative challenges include **bureaucratic hurdles during NGO registration** ("At the registration stage, registrars can arbitrarily demand various documents...") leading some to prefer informal status for flexibility ("The informal status allowed us to exist in a sort of legal vacuum... It gave us more freedom"). Additionally, activists noted the paralysis or inaction of government institutions: "Officials simply do not fulfill their duties... There are no mechanisms to make them do so."

Communication, Networking, and Local Government Interaction

Communication and networking primarily rely on **informal, horizontal connections built through personal trust and collaboration:** "We have an alliance – as we say, of sensible civic organizations – that are active and with whom you can talk or join forces." Personal contacts are key for recruitment and partnerships ("Personal contacts work best..."). While some national platforms are effective ("Networking through the national platform for resilience – yes, the NCPP is a powerful analytical center..."), large formal meetings are often seen as unproductive ("...it ends with people simply leaving, realizing that no positive or practical decisions will be made"). Some activists act as local hubs ("I offer it to those organizations that specialize... I basically consult and direct..."). These informal networks are adaptive but fragile, risking insularity.

Interaction with local self-government is ambivalent. Political complexities arise, especially with dual civil-military administrations: “In our community, besides the city council and deputies, there’s now the [Name] military administration. And this parallel structure creates certain problems...” and “...they are clearly politicized.” Activists report authorities demanding political alignment (“You either support the political force currently in power – or you’re against us”), offering only tokenistic support (“They kept nodding, saying they would help – and in the end, they only showed up to pose for photos”), or providing declarative but not substantive backing (“No one objects... but there is no actual support beyond words”). Often, the lack of obstruction is perceived as the best possible outcome (“When we ask to co-organize an event, they might say: we won’t forbid it, but don’t expect any support either”). **Successful cooperation often depends on individual officials** (the "human factor": “Everything depends on the person…”) rather than systemic processes, though some examples of strategic collaboration exist (“We’re working to involve residents in the process of shaping plans and strategies…”).

Block 2: Future Scenarios

To understand the resilience and strategic foresight of activists within Ukraine's volatile context, the focus group discussed potential future disruptions. Participants reflected on three hypothetical scenarios – funding cuts, government changes, and military escalation – demonstrating high adaptability often informed by prior lived experience.

Scenario 1: Funding Cuts

This was viewed not as hypothetical but as a familiar reality. Activists reported strategies of cost minimization, seeking alternatives, and continuing work with available resources: “This is a situation we’re used to. We’ll try to find funding... while we don’t have it – we’ll implement what we can with minimal resources, or do it ourselves for free...” Losing funding means losing tools, not stopping entirely: “...worsening funding – would simply mean losing access to some tools... due to lack of funding, I lost access to an analytics system...”

Scenario 2: Change in Government

This was met largely with indifference or resignation, given the perceived lack of current support. Activists expect little change in their operational reality: “As for the authorities, if there’s a change – well, the current ones don’t really support us anyway. So for us, nothing will really change.” Some expressed fatigue with political cycles: “It doesn’t matter to me who is in charge... They’re usually the same anyway.”

Scenario 3: Escalation of Military Action

This elicited the most personal responses, often drawing on direct experience. Participants anticipated pivoting back to volunteering, humanitarian aid, and essential local support: “For a long time... I was volunteering. I hope we’ll survive again and join the territorial defense, volunteer... because there’s no other option.” They foresaw redirecting efforts based on immediate needs: “It would mean redirecting our efforts from leisure and youth projects to whatever is most relevant for the region at the time.” Activity might

decrease under severe conditions (loss of power/communication), but not cease: "...the effectiveness will just decrease, not disappear."

Overall, **participants view these scenarios not as existential threats but as challenges requiring strategic adaptation,** demonstrating resilience rooted in past crises and a persistent willingness to engage.

Block 3: Motivations and Constraints

Beyond operational factors, understanding the personal drivers and potential deterrents is crucial to grasping the sustainability of civic engagement. The focus group participants revealed deep intrinsic motivations fuelling their activism, while also candidly acknowledging the circumstances or pressures that could potentially limit their involvement.

The core drive stems from personal values, a sense of purpose, and the desire to effect change: "I've been doing this for 30 years... I've done it and I'll keep doing it…"; "This is truly an internal need for me... to be useful." Specific motivations include supporting youth, particularly in underserved rural areas ("Young people inspire me... when you try once and it works, then try again and it works again…"), and addressing the challenging reintegration of veterans ("We make heroes out of them only when they're on the front line. But when they return... they just get in our way").

While factors like fatigue, psychological pressure, and lack of visible results were mentioned as potential constraints, **participants generally spoke of adapting or refocusing rather than stopping altogether.** Their outlook involves adjusting to circumstances and, for some, planning for succession: "I hope the new leader will continue to support this… because I'm getting older, and in a youth organization, there should be a young person."

Ultimately, **participant motivation appears largely non-pragmatic, grounded in strong value-based commitments to their communities and country.** Activism functions as a way of life, with internal drive persisting despite significant external pressures like war and instability.

Conclusions

This third wave of research, conducted in early 2025, offers a multilayered picture of change, continuity, and strain within Ukrainian hromadas nearly three years into Russia's full-scale invasion. Drawing on a combination of longitudinal survey data and in-depth qualitative insights, the report examines five interconnected domains: economic well-being, local security, governance and civicness, decentralization dynamics, and the lived experience of activists. Together, these findings reveal not only the adaptive capacity of local communities but also the structural and contextual barriers that continue to challenge democratic resilience and institutional development at the local level.

1. Economic Well-Being and Access to Social Infrastructure

Economic recovery across Ukrainian hromadas is uneven but discernibly underway. Survey data reveal that access to basic services has improved since 2023, particularly in healthcare, education, postal delivery, and digital connectivity. Road and transport conditions, long-standing problem areas, also show significant improvements – though these gains are uneven across urban and rural contexts. Electricity supply remains vulnerable, with seasonal spikes in reported disruption reflecting ongoing attacks on infrastructure.

Perceptions of **employment opportunities rose from 3.1 to 5.0** between March 2023 and February 2025, and **income perceptions improved from 3.5 to 4.4**. These trends suggest incremental stabilization of the labor market, albeit with qualifications. High unemployment, inflation, and demographic challenges continue to dampen perceived well-being, especially in rural and frontline areas. Economic stress is compounded by aging infrastructure, uneven business support, and the **withdrawal of major donors like USAID**. However, the average score for access to social support programs rose to 6.1 – reflecting broader recognition of local government and donor-led welfare interventions.

Local authorities have taken proactive steps in response. Open-ended data point to interventions in infrastructure, support for entrepreneurs, international fundraising, and the renovation of schools and hospitals. Despite the fragility of local budgets, many communities have leveraged donor programs and strategic planning to support economic recovery. Still, qualitative accounts reveal persistent dissatisfaction with transparency, fiscal prioritization, and uneven access to aid, pointing to governance and trust issues that intersect with economic recovery.

2. Security

Security remains a defining concern, with communities continuing to face missile strikes, drone attacks, sabotage attempts, and disinformation campaigns. Perceived public safety improved from 5.2 to 6.2 in 2023 but declined again to 5.9 by early 2025. This reflects renewed military offensives and heightened anxieties amid protracted hostilities. While the availability and quality of bomb shelters have improved – rising from 3.7 to 4.7 – these scores remain below the midpoint, underscoring ongoing infrastructure gaps.

Trust in local police declined from 6.7 to 6.2 over the same period. Survey data and qualitative accounts suggest this decline is linked to wartime role expansion, policing militarization, and perceived delays in responding to civilian safety needs. Parallel authority structures, particularly the coexistence of Local Self-Government Bodies

(LSGBs) and Military Administrations, generate confusion and occasionally erode local trust.

The perception of key security threats also evolved. Missile attacks and direct military assault remain the most cited concerns, but cybercrime and forced displacement have gained prominence. This diversification of perceived threats reflects broader shifts in Ukraine's security landscape. Meanwhile, civilian engagement in military training, despite rising awareness, has declined significantly – from 30% in 2023 to just 7% in 2025 – highlighting a gap between recognition and action likely driven by fatigue, de-escalation narratives, and shifting threat perceptions.

Social tensions remain present but not dominant. Roughly 43% of respondents reported localized conflict, primarily between IDPs and long-term residents, religious groups, or differing language communities. Disputes over military service, corruption, and economic inequality also emerged. While these tensions are often subtle, they reflect enduring structural divides exacerbated by the war. Local dialogue platforms, when activated, have helped to mediate these divisions but are not yet widespread.

Beyond immediate military threats, Ukraine faces growing risks tied to global trends in democratic erosion. The expansion of emergency powers and reliance on securitized governance tools, while often necessary, may gradually normalize exceptional measures and undermine trust in institutions. Scholars warn that under prolonged crisis conditions, even democratic actors can shift toward illiberal practices (Schedler 2023; Svolik 2019). Additionally, the broader phenomenon of "authoritarian contagion" poses indirect risks to Ukraine through polarization, executive concentration, and declining civic trust (Cooper 2021).

3. Governance and Civicness

Perceptions of local government performance have remained largely stable across the waves, with modest improvements. Efficiency ratings across economic management and infrastructure provision improved slightly, and satisfaction with local government interaction held relatively firm (55% in 2023 vs. 47% in 2025 expressing satisfaction). These patterns suggest cautious recognition of institutional adaptation under wartime conditions.

Perceptions of corruption appear to be improving: compared to early 2023, far fewer respondents in 2025 considered local corruption "very common" (down from 34.7% to 16.8%). Those who said corruption in their hromada was "not common" in 2025 rose to 46.4% from 33.1%.

One of the most important shifts observed is in the **form and visibility** of cooperation. Following a peak of wartime solidarity and spontaneous collaboration in 2022-2023, patterns of engagement have become more professionalized, routinized, and less publicly visible. The perceived level of cooperation with the Armed Forces of Ukraine and volunteers declined sharply in late 2023 but plateaued in 2025, suggesting institutionalization and securitization rather than breakdown.

Activist interaction with local authorities remains frequent, with 77% of respondents in 2025 reporting engagement over the past six months. However, open-ended responses and focus group data show increasing frustration over symbolic participation mechanisms, procedural opacity, and selective support. Formal participatory tools (e.g., civic councils, participatory budgeting, public hearings) exist in many hromadas, but are infrequently used and seldom trusted. Informal channels – direct personal appeals, ad hoc initiatives – continue to dominate.

Despite these limitations, activists report that constructive cooperation is possible, particularly where political leadership is responsive or where civic organizations have strong networks. Still, one-third of respondents cite deliberate exclusion, lack of responsiveness, or the symbolic nature of participatory mechanisms. These challenges point to the need for procedural reforms and institutional guarantees for civic inclusion.

4. Decentralization and Polycentric Governance

While decentralization remains legally intact, wartime pressures have significantly impacted its implementation. Most respondents report that the war has **had either a moderate or significant effect on the decentralization process,** particularly the redirection of the part of local budgets and local military PIT taxes to national defense. Despite these changes, no formal legal reversals of decentralization have occurred. The framework of local self-governance remains constitutionally protected, even if its practical application is now constrained.

Encouragingly, there are signs that core features of **polycentric governance** are functioning under stress. Among the three mechanisms assessed – resource mobilization, facilitation of local knowledge, and innovation – mobilization emerged as the strongest. Local governments received high marks (5.6-5.8) for activating civic networks and reallocating human and financial resources. The decisive role of activists in crisis response scored even higher (6.8), reinforcing the continued co-production of governance in emergencies.

Facilitation of local knowledge (average 5.1) and institutionalized innovation (4.5-4.6) remain underdeveloped, though notable practices were reported, particularly in strategy co-creation, civic hubs, and veteran policy design. These lower scores reflect a lack of scaling and systematization, rather than an absence of intent. Overall, the report finds that while the polycentric governance model is **partially implemented**, it offers a viable foundation for strengthening resilience and civic accountability in recovery planning.

5. Civic Resilience: Perspectives from the Focus Group

The focus group confirmed and deepened the report's survey findings. Activists operate under immense stress – from funding loss and emotional burnout to political obstruction and legal ambiguity. Yet despite these pressures, participants continue to adapt, driven by strong value-based commitments. Their resilience is rooted in improvisational problem-solving, mutual aid networks, and a pragmatic, sometimes skeptical view of state institutions.

Participants reported frequent interaction with local authorities, but emphasized the importance of informal relationships and individual personalities over systemic collaboration. While they foresee continued civic engagement, they also expect future crises to disrupt or redirect their work. Their responses to hypothetical scenarios – funding cuts, regime change, renewed escalation – demonstrated strategic foresight and adaptive capacity. However, sustainability remains a concern: activists called for institutional investment, fairer funding mechanisms, and better protection for civic space.

Together, the five blocks of this report outline a wartime civic landscape marked by strain but sustained by innovation, commitment, and evolving forms of local governance. The data underscores the continued potential of Ukrainian hromadas to serve as laboratories of resilience – and the urgent need to support their capacity, inclusion, and accountability as Ukraine moves toward post-war recovery.

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