

National Security in Local Hands?

HOW LOCAL AUTHORITIES CONTRIBUTE TO UKRAINE'S RESILIENCE

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Oleksandra Keudel¹

Kyiv School of Economics

Oksana Huss²

Bologna University

As Russia struggles on the battlefield, it increasingly tries to bend Ukrainian resistance by targeting civilians in various ways. Most recently, Russian officials [strove](#) to freeze, starve, or force Ukrainians into exile through attacks on energy infrastructure. Despite thousands of civilians killed, almost 12 million [displaced](#) and [departed](#), and direct material losses [amounting](#) to \$127 billion, noncombatant resistance in Ukraine continues formidably, to the surprise of many observers.

Local self-government authorities (LAs) are [contributing](#) to this resilience significantly, and here we present new research on how. LA's tackle crises of damaged critical infrastructure, organize civilian defenses and bomb shelters, and search for solutions for the displaced and unemployed. Ukraine's self-government officials practice collaborative governance, demonstrating a need for a re-conceptualization of national security to take stock of grassroots security, development, and democracy. High public trust in LAs shown by recent polls [reflects](#) public recognition of their community commitments. A noteworthy caveat is that Ukrainian martial law has limited elections, the movement of people, and the transparency of governmental programs and initiatives. Nonetheless, collaborative governance partially compensates for the (temporary) lack of accountability while setting a cornerstone for more egalitarian and responsive politics down the road.

Center-Periphery Context

Decentralization reform, launched in 2014, resulted in profound changes in the territorial organization of Ukraine. It strengthened local self-government, [creating](#) the scope and conditions for its resilience today. In particular, local officials became more efficient in

¹ Oleksandra Keudel is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Public Policy and Governance at the Kyiv School of Economics, Ukraine, and a Petrach Ukrainian Studies Fellow at IERES.

² Oksana Huss is a Researcher in the ERC-funded BIT-ACT research project at the University of Bologna, Italy, and a Lecturer at the Anti-Corruption Research and Education Centre in Kyiv, Ukraine.

generating revenues and providing public services thanks to the amalgamation of “hromadas” (municipalities or communities) and an increase in their fiscal and political autonomy. Decentralization reform provided LAs with actual competencies and resources to respond directly to citizens’ needs. Increased capacities and autonomy also [provided](#) the impetus for more transparent, accountable, and increasingly collaborative local governance. The European Commission President [praised](#) the decentralization reform as a “success” when remarking on Ukraine’s EU Candidate Status.

The introduction of martial law due to the full-scale Russian invasion had implications for Ukraine’s multi-level governance system. First, the community heads [received](#) additional competencies in the security realm. Regional military administrations ([RMA](#)) were entrusted with the authority to organize the provision of social services. LAs can [tap](#) into special funds to meet emergency needs in communities. Second, martial law suspended traditional democratic mechanisms. It significantly [limits](#) elections and cancels referendums, protests, and strikes. Finally, transparency has been [curtailed](#): some drafts of local government acts do not need to be made public.

Similarly, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (CMU) [restricted](#) the publication of open data, and despite restrictions being later eased, some accountability-related data is still not available. Together, these changes may provide speed and some flexibility in decision-making and can be justified by security considerations. Still, these changes often increase agents’ discretion and weaken accountability in the multi-level governance system.

A Wartime Survey of Ukrainian Local Authorities

Below we report selected findings from a survey of Ukrainian LAs fielded between August 30 and September 20, 2022. It was commissioned by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (CoE Congress) and the [Association of Ukrainian Cities](#). The sample consisted of 241 responses, which is 16 percent of all hromadas in Ukraine. The results of the survey mainly reflect the practices and attitudes of communities with 50,000 residents or less, rural and urban, as they comprise 86 percent of respondents. Among responding municipalities, 192 were outside combat areas, and 17 had been liberated from Russian occupation at the time of the survey. Seven interviews and two focus groups with public officials from urban and rural communities, local and regional levels, and communities in different security situations (except occupied communities) informed the survey questionnaire.

Local Authorities as Actors of Democratic Resilience

The conventional approach to the resilience of a country against a foreign invasion led many experts and politicians to falsely predict Ukraine’s fall within days. This approach confines the state’s capacity to resist an invasion to military factors, such as the number of soldiers and equipment. Contrary to this expectation, the Armed Forces of Ukraine have not only

fought, but communities and their local authorities have been resisting. In our sample of 241 communities, two-thirds preserved their normal operations despite the full-scale invasion. Twenty-eight percent never halted their functions, and 43 percent returned to normal operations within two weeks after the full-scale invasion or liberation. Moreover, among the 17 liberated communities in our sample, two communities reported never halting operations, meaning that local authority was operational under occupation. This refers to the executive functions only and pertains to the provision of humanitarian aid or the organization of evacuation.

All of the communities outside the combat zone and those that were liberated provide administrative services and most deliver all services (72 percent). Services are provided offline through the administrative service centers and their branches and via the [Diia](#) app. Despite destruction, hromadas continue providing social services. For example, in education, at least 1,270 schools and 786 kindergartens were destroyed or damaged by September 1, [according](#) to the KSE Institute. Some schools are used as collective centers for IDPs, [according](#) to IOM. Nevertheless, 12,924 schools began their school year in 2022, and 60 percent did so offline, while the rest went online, [according](#) to the Ukraine Education Ombudsman's report.

According to a conventional perception of security, an increase in executive discretion is a natural reaction of a state at war because of the expectation that this would streamline the response. Contrary to this, the survey shows that LAs act based on decisions by their collegial bodies (the executive committee and the hromada council) while managing an emergency, thus sustaining legitimacy in their decision-making. Most hromadas hold council meetings offline or develop provisions for the hybrid participation of councilors. For example, in Boyarka of Kyiv region, one of the councilors connects to the council sessions online straight from his duty post within the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The rest of the councilors meet in person.³

The latest public opinion poll suggests that citizens take note of the LAs' efforts. Ukrainian local authorities enjoy the highest public trust in government after state and civil institutions directly responsible for security: 63 percent of Ukrainians trust mayors and 60 percent trust councils, [according](#) to a representative poll by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in September 2022. Such a high public trust indicates public recognition of LAs' commitment to their communities and their duties as community representatives and providers of public services. Maintaining public trust is, in turn, crucial to sustaining social cohesion in the face of the Russian invasion.

³ Interview with a public official from the Boyarka local authority.

Collaborative Governance in Response to War-Related Crises

Governance practices of Ukrainian local authorities challenge the common conceptions of citizen-state relations for countries at war. According to them, the role of the non-military public is confined to one of the (potential) victims to be protected. While protection remains critical, Ukrainian local authorities tend to collaborate with non-state stakeholders in solving war-related crises. LAs, thus, treat stakeholders from the public as potential partners, elevating their role from mere subjects to agents.

Ukrainian local authorities practice collaborative governance, a network-based governance mode that enables other stakeholders—businesses, NGOs, interest groups, and other authorities—to contribute to the solutions with resources and (local) knowledge. It also includes the use of national and international peer networks to find scarce resources, circulate information, and learn from each other about how to adjust in a crisis. LAs have been front-runners in elements of collaborative governance before the full-scale invasion. For example, the Ukrainian cities of Vinnytsia and Khmelnytskyi [received](#) global recognition for their public engagement initiatives as recipients of OGP Local Awards.

Pre-existing participatory practices likely made it easier to collaborate with various stakeholders on war-related crises. Almost every second respondent-LA marked public hearings and consultations as helping “significantly.” For a third of respondents, a participatory budget is a helpful practice—even though no hromada started a new cycle this year. Moreover, some LAs adapted their pre-existing institutions for public engagement to war-related challenges. For example, the Ternopil youth council and the center for social services, “Rodynne Kolo” (“family circle”) in the Biliaiev hromada near Odesa, [started](#) to [coordinate](#) humanitarian aid. These findings indicate the advantage of open communication with stakeholders in that it gives the skill and establishes a collaborative culture that can support emergency response.

With the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian local authorities deepened and widened their public engagement practice. Most liberated communities and those outside the combat zone (160 of 204, or 78 percent) introduced additional initiatives to inform and engage the public after February 24, 2022. Compared to 2021, more LAs recognize that public engagement can help them handle the complexity and resource shortage (see **Figure 1**). Almost all respondents indicated coordination of help (92 percent) and meeting the needs of vulnerable social groups (91 percent) as the primary purposes of their public engagement initiatives.

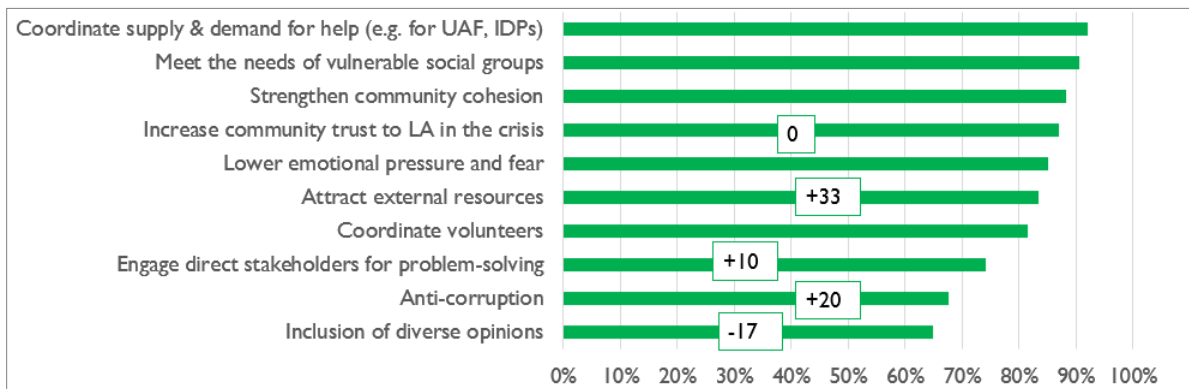
Moreover, there has been a striking increase in the number of respondent LAs that selected the practical purpose of public engagement—to attract external resources (+33 p.p. compared to 2021). For example, in collaboration with the Novoiarychiv hromada council in the Lviv region, local entrepreneurs [provided](#) “social taxis” to residents and displaced citizens. In addition, several communities outside the areas of hostilities organized food and equipment for the affected communities, and local authorities coordinated the support. For

example, Kiptiv and Ponornytsia in the Chernihiv region [baked](#) bread for bordering occupied communities; the Mykhailivska community [provided](#) the Zaporizhzhia maternity hospital with milk.

Under high-security threats, it is natural to expect that local authorities, if functioning, would focus on essential service provision and approach citizens as clients. For LAs in Ukraine, however, values remain central in participatory initiatives. LAs show commitment to their communities and care for the relations between the community and its authorities, including considerations of trust and public integrity. Increasing community trust remains one of the primary purposes for most LAs (at 87 percent, no change since 2021) to introduce public engagement initiatives. LAs seem to feel responsible for community cohesion (marked primary purpose by 88 percent) and aspects of their communities’ emotional and social well-being, such as reducing emotional pressures (85 percent) and tackling information uncertainty (71 percent).

Anti-corruption seems to be lower in priority. However, the value increased significantly compared to the 2021 Baseline Survey: from 47 percent in 2021 to 68 percent in 2022. This is even more striking because martial law has lifted many accountability and transparency requirements. For example, local authorities use customer relationship management (CRM) systems to track humanitarian aid and prevent abuse by recipients in Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv.⁴ Often, IT business or IT-savvy members would develop such systems together with LAs, indicating a collaborative approach to meeting public demands for integrity.

Figure 1. The Purpose of Public Information and Engagement Initiatives During War

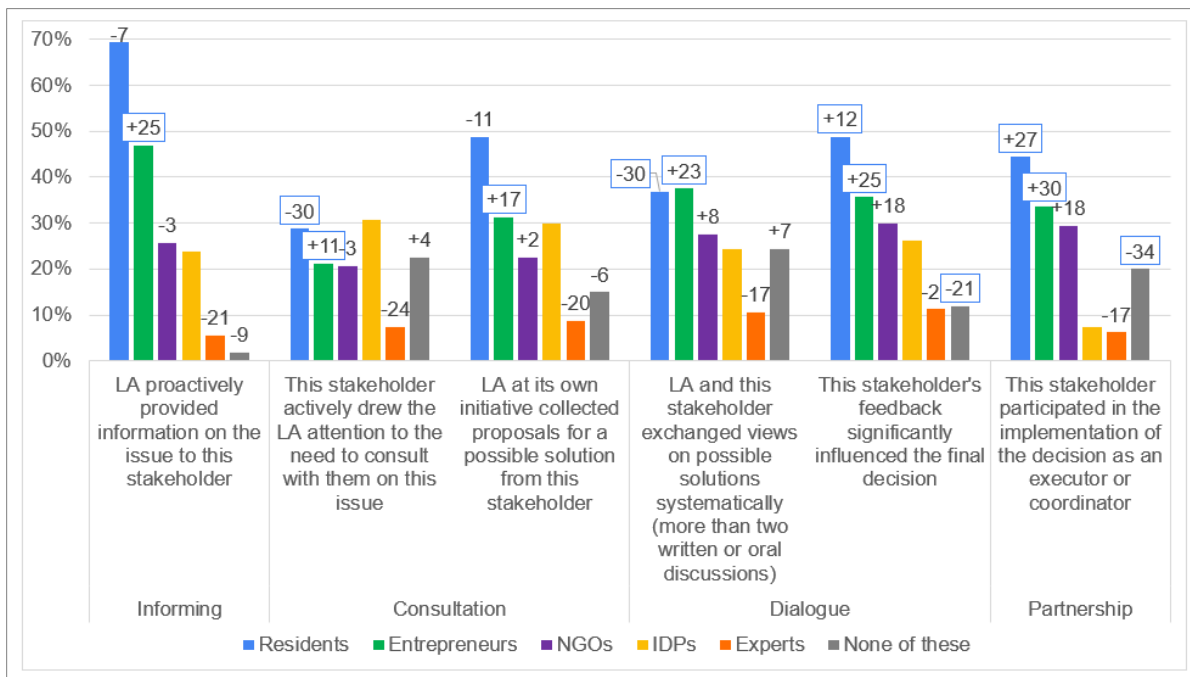


Note: n opinions = 134, n needs of vulnerable groups = 150, n community cohesion = 153, n reduce fear = 147, n engage direct stakeholders = 143, n trust = 147, n anti-corruption = 139, n coordinate volunteers = 146, n attract resources = 145, n coordinate demand & supply = 149, n reduce chaos = 147. Question: What was the purpose with which the LA in your community introduced initiatives on informing and/or engaging citizens or businesses after 24.02.2022? Mark what was a primary or a secondary purpose or was irrelevant. Figures in white squares indicate change compared to the 2021 Baseline Survey. The figure shows only “primary” responses.

⁴ Noted by focus group participants from these cities.

LAs involve the public in solving critical problems: providing IDPs with food and personal items (51 percent) and housing (23 percent), followed by providing residents with food and personal items (13 percent) (respondents could select only one option). Notably, accommodation for IDPs is among the top challenges where LAs need external support, and it seems that they seek it from the public and businesses. Indeed, when asked about stakeholder engagement in solving the critical problems mentioned above, more communities than in the 2021 report involving stakeholders at different levels (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Stakeholder Engagement in Solving Critical Problems by Level of Citizen Participation



Note: n = 160 (liberated communities and those outside combat areas who confirmed having public informing and participation initiatives). Forms of engagement are grouped by levels of citizen participation according to the CoE Congress. The numbers above the columns show a change in percentage points (p.p.) compared to the 2021 Baseline Survey (the 2021 survey did not feature the "IDP" category). Blue rectangles denote the most significant changes. Question: Indicate which stakeholders and how they were involved in solving the problem you identified in the previous question. Multiple stakeholders could be selected.

LAs seem to appreciate the practical value of partnership with stakeholders in implementing solutions for war-related problems. More LAs than in 2021 report involving stakeholders in implementing policy decisions as executors or coordinators (up to +30 p.p., depending on stakeholder), with entrepreneurs (+30 p.p.) and residents (+27 p.p.) seeing the highest increases. More LAs also report seeking feedback from entrepreneurs, followed by citizens and NGOs for their decision-making (up to +25 p.p, depending on stakeholder). This suggests that more LAs perceive external stakeholders as sources of helpful information or resources, which creates a foundation for partnerships. For example, collaboration with IDPs was fruitful for integrating relocated citizens and businesses in Zhytomyr. In Zhytomyr,

several IDPs with a background in IT and international technical cooperation offered to work together with the LA. They surveyed the capacities and skills of IDPs (via a chatbot, which they developed) and made a database of available housing. Later many survey participants were hired by the LA or other local organizations, including companies. Through this engagement, relocated and local businesses also established contact.⁵

Conclusion

Local authorities in Ukraine are the backbone of national resilience in crises arising from the war. The ongoing work of LAs under high-security threats has ensured the adequacy of public services to the current needs of citizens and provided legitimate centers to manage crises and coordinate resources in line with the local context. In addition, there have been very few traitors among community heads. Both indicate the importance of the decentralization reform, which strengthened communities' political authority and fiscal autonomy and increased efficiency.

The contribution of LAs to Ukraine's resilience challenges the conventional thinking of security confined to mere military terms. Instead, the results highlight the importance of collaborative governance for facing disruptions and managing complex crises. New ways of thinking about national security include network-based instead of hierarchy-based and partnership-oriented instead of client-service-oriented philosophy in citizen-state relations.

Looking ahead, local authorities in Ukraine are capable partners for national authorities and international donors for recovery processes. The international community, for example, [OECD](#), emphasizes the transparent and accountable use of recovery funds for infrastructure. Local authorities have the tools to source their residents' needs and report back; due to their proximity to residents, they are also well-placed to be driven to the account by the active Ukrainian civil society.

Finally, these findings highlight that even the most impressive instances of mass activism and engagement require institutions that facilitate and channel this engagement to multiply the effort. The decentralization reform created incentives for local public authorities to engage citizens and favorable conditions for citizens to influence the local redistribution of public resources. That is why supporting and strengthening decentralization is critical, especially under war conditions and for future post-war recovery.

⁵ Noted by a public official from Zhytomyr (urban) at a focus group.