

HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN ACCELERATE EU INTEGRATION

Lessons from Ukrainian-Swedish municipal partnerships



Executive Summary

The ICLD Network for Democratic Resilience brings together 30 Swedish and Ukrainian municipalities working to strengthen democratic institutions, inclusive governance, and local resilience in times of crisis and war.

This policy brief draws on case studies from 13 partnerships (2022–2026), interviews, and research, showing how peer-to-peer cooperation supports EU integration through stronger participation, transparent governance, and community resilience under pressure, while offering lessons for democratic resilience across Europe.

Key Terms

Acquis communautaire (the “acquis”)

The accumulated body of EU law — legislation, policies, court decisions — that candidate countries must adopt and implement as part of accession negotiations. EC: Chapters of the Acquis.

Copenhagen criteria

The political, economic and administrative conditions a candidate must fulfil to join the EU, including stable democratic institutions, rule of law, human rights, functioning market economy, and the capacity to adopt and implement EU law.

EUR-Lex: Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria) ; EC: Conditions for membership

Treaty on European Union (TEU)

Provides the legal basis for EU membership and sets out foundational values (democracy, rule of law, human rights) that candidate states must respect. EUR-Lex: Treaty on European Union — Joining the EU.



Sustainable Development Goal number 17: Partnerships for the goals

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Cover photo: The participants in ICLD's Democratic Resilience Network visiting the European Commission.

All photos: ICLD, unless otherwise stated.

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“Protecting democracy and building the democratic resilience of citizens, societies and institutions is an urgent collective endeavour, which requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach.

European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies¹

Introduction

As Ukraine has successfully completed its screening process for EU accession negotiations, it is the moment to fulfil what is referred to as the *fundamentals* of EU legislation: judicial reform, anti-corruption, and democratic institutions². While accession is formally negotiated at the national level, up to 70% of the *Acquis Communautaire* is implemented by municipalities³, according to the European Committee of the Regions (CoR). That means the practical fulfilment of the Copenhagen political criteria to enter the EU – stable democratic institutions, rule of law, a functioning market economy, human rights, and protection of minorities – is also dependent on the performance of local governments⁴.

The principle of subsidiarity holds that decisions should be made at the lowest appropriate level, and local governments are the level closest to the citizens. While this does call for their formal involvement in designing EU support mechanisms for the recovery, reconstruction and modernisation of Ukraine⁵, it also makes it essential to improve local capacity for citizen participation, transparency and effective governance. There is much to learn from international peers in this regard, just as municipalities from other countries learn from Ukraine’s decentralisation and democratisation.

As such, municipalities in Ukraine can contribute to the acceleration of EU integration by building democratic practices within and beyond formal structures, including in collaboration with international partners. This policy brief describes selected municipal partnerships’ work with youth inclusion, digitalisation and urban planning for a more resilient society, exemplifying how international local level partnerships matters for EU-accession. The brief ends with practical recommendations to Ukrainian local governments and EU support actors working with them.

¹ European Commission, 2025

² European Commission news article; the “Fundamentals First” principle as explained by Promote Ukraine Media

³ See CoR opinion on the Enlargement package 2023 and the follow-up enlargement opinion 2025

⁴ See the Principle of subsidiarity, in the Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, Article 5(3), 2012 OJ C326/13, and Copenhagen criteria overview

⁵ See for example the Ukraine Facility

Methodology

This policy brief draws on case studies from 13 municipal partnerships (2022–2026), interviews with municipal officials, and review of EU accession criteria and relevant literature. We combine insights from partnership progress reports, oral testimonies and network conferences with findings from research on decentralisation and resilience, conducted by Kyiv School of Economics, a partner university of ICLD in Ukraine⁶. The material was analysed thematically with a focus on three core capacities: participation, transparency, and social resilience.

ICLD Network for Democratic Resilience

The Network for Democratic Resilience brings together 30 municipalities from Sweden and Ukraine in a shared mission to strengthen democratic institutions and practices and build resilient, inclusive societies, even in times of war or crisis

Democratic resilience refers to a political system's capacity to withstand challenges and adapt to threats without compromising its core democratic principles, institutions, or processes – and how those, in turn, increase resilience.

The Network for Democratic Resilience 2024-2026 consists of the following partnerships:

- Falun – Kolomiya
- Piteå – Lutsk
- Höör – Kopychynitsi
- Jönköping – Berdychiv
- Kalmar – Poltava
- Karlskrona – Chortkiv
- Berg – Krolevets
- Trollhättan – Fastiv
- Umeå – Kherson
- Ronneby – Ternopil
- Karlskoga – Shepetivka
- Västerås – Shatsk
- Växjö – Kalush
- Lidingö – Slavuta
- Gotland – Berislav

⁶ See especially Darkovich et al, 2024. The partnership includes three research projects with corresponding publications: <https://icld.se/en/researchproject/citizen-engagement-in-times-of-polycrisis-learning-from-ukraines-communities-during-russias-full-scale-invasion/> ; <https://icld.se/en/researchproject/local-democracy-and-resilience-in-ukraine-learning-from-communities-crisis-response-in-war/> and <https://icld.se/en/researchproject/opening-the-black-box-of-political-will-local-public-authorities-and-anti-corruption-efforts-in-ukraine/>

How local governments can accelerate EU integration

The Treaty on European Union reinforces this local anchoring of democracy: Article 10(3) establishes that EU decisions must be taken “as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen”, while Article 4(2) recognises local self-government as part of the Union’s constitutional identity⁷. In the aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution in 2014, decentralisation reforms were launched, supported by EU programmes such as U-LEAD with Europe. Consequently, municipalities have assumed stronger mandates for citizen service delivery. Since Ukraine was granted EU candidate status in 2022, the EU-Commission has stressed the importance of Ukraine’s active civil society and has highlighted the decentralisation reforms granting greater authority to local governments as one of the most important progresses in Ukraine’s EU-accession process.

For Ukraine, decentralisation has also been decisive for societal resilience. Research on Ukraine’s wartime crisis response shows how municipalities sustain essential services, uphold transparent procedures, coordinate volunteer networks, and adapt participatory practices even under extreme pressure⁸. Decentralisation has established polycentric, community-anchored governance structures, where social cohesion, citizen engagement, and cross-sector collaboration became crucial sources of democratic practices and resilience⁹. These new governance structures demonstrate enhanced accountability mechanisms, citizen participation, and protection of human rights, which all align with the Copenhagen criteria.



Network meeting in Tallin 2025

⁷ See the consolidated text on the Treaty on EUR-Lex

⁸ Darkovich et al, 2024; Horesb et al, 2024; Mehnykowska et al, 2025; Rabinovych et al, 2023; Kendel and Huss, 2023

⁹ Ibid.

For European partners, directing reform assistance only through central government bodies or national financing frameworks may unintentionally sideline regional and local authorities, limiting their direct participation in the chain of governance and further weakening their institutional autonomy and scope for independent action¹⁰.

Against this background, international municipal partnerships, including the programmes facilitated by ICLD, function as practical laboratories of EU alignment, where local governments localise, adapt and embed EU-compatible governance practices. Across multiple Ukrainian–Swedish partnerships, municipalities operationalise European democratic values from the bottom up even under wartime pressure and despite the very different preconditions municipalities in Ukraine face.

They do so in three key areas:

1. **Strengthening democratic institutions and citizen participation**, since EU principles requires democracy to be exercised “as closely as possible to the citizen” (Art. 10(3) TEU) and demands stability of democratic institutions and protection of rights.
2. **Transparent, accountable & effective governance** Aligning transparency and governance practices with EU standards – adopting transparent, rule-of-law-based approaches in policy planning, data management, and public service delivery.
3. **Promoting social cohesion and community resilience**, since the Copenhagen criteria require protection of minorities and human rights, and Article 2 TEU establishes equality, non-discrimination, and solidarity as core Union values.

¹⁰ Lindström 2025

1. Stenghtening democratic institutions and citizen participation:

Building structured youth engagement and community dialogue

Everyday participation structures like youth engagement, community dialogues and inclusive decision-making, are linked to EU youth policy and the principle of subsidiarity. It enables authorities to be responsive to the actual needs of citizens and distribute or mobilise resources in effective ways¹¹. Participatory processes must be designed to allow feedback loops and integrating input into formal decision-making. To avoid tokenistic participation, participatory mechanisms must be embedded in everyday decision-making and municipal routine.

CASE:

Höör-Kopychyntsi Building inclusive participation in rural areas



Project members from Höör and Kopychyntsi.

¹¹ Darkovich, A., Huss, O., Keudel, O., & Hatsko, V. (2024). *Local Democracy and Resilience in Ukraine: Learning from Communities' Crisis Response in War*. ICLD Research Report No. 33. <https://icld.se/en/publications/local-democracy-and-resilience-in-ukraine-learning-from-communities-crisis-response-in-war/>

The partnership between Höör, Sweden, and Kopychyntsi, Ukraine, develops inclusive approaches to youth and community participation, focusing on rural schools and villages.

Joint surveys and school-based consultations revealed gaps between teachers' and students' perceptions of democratic education: while teachers often overestimate students' understanding, many young people report limited comprehension of human rights, sustainable development, and their potential influence in local governance.

To address this, Kopychyntsi has budgeted for a Youth Worker position and strengthened the Navkolo Youth Centre as a safe, accessible space for dialogue, training, and informal learning. Target group outreach includes school-bus transport for rural children and structured activities that encourage collaborative decision-making, such as a locally designed tabletop game on city development linked to SDGs. Teachers act as facilitators, supporting youth-led initiatives, youth councils, and scout groups, while integrating lessons on civil defence and crisis preparedness.

The initiative also fosters engagement with EU structures through thematic days about EU values, inviting students to interact with national representatives, local officials, and international peers involved in the Ukrainian accession process. By combining accessible physical spaces, permanently instated professional support, and experiential learning, Kopychyntsi ensures that previously underrepresented groups, particularly rural youth can participate meaningfully in local development.

2. Transparent, accountable & effective governance:

Applying digital planning tools, consultation systems, and rights-based assessments

EU accession requires transparent, accountable, and effective governance. This is equally important at the local level, and, like participation, also extends beyond formal procedures. While digital planning tools, participatory budgeting platforms and rights-based assessments offer important opportunities, these tools only work when staff can manage them and residents trust them. Their impact depends on local administrative capacity, staff competencies, and residents' access to these systems. If they are not adopted with care, these instruments risk reproducing existing inequalities in service delivery or engagement. Transparent and accountable governance also improves local governments' access to grants and EU funds important for reconstruction¹².

CASE:

Umeå-Kherson

Transparent planning and digital participation in reconstruction



Project members from Umeå - Kherson.

Kherson is incorporating digital tools into reconstruction planning through collaboration with Umeå, Sweden. The city is developing a public GIS layer that visualises damage assessments, infrastructure needs, and updated zoning information, making planning choices more accessible to residents and civil society. Gender considerations are integrated through data-informed planning, accounting for different needs and mobility patterns of women and girls. With much of the population displaced, reconstruction is guided by the needs and aspirations of returning citizens.

An open-source dialogue platform will allow citizens to comment on proposed priorities, while cross-departmental coordination will link aggregated citizen input to resource allocation and project sequencing. This ensures that feedback informs planning decisions, which is important for transparency and accountability. Initial digital dialogues have identified challenges in public engagement due to displacement, limited digital capacity among residents, and varying levels of trust in authorities, underlining the importance of communication and feedback loops to sustain participation and social cohesion.

¹² See for example the EU flagship Fund for the reconstruction of Ukraine (https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-flagship-fund-reconstruction-ukraine_en)

CASE:

Shatsk-Västerås

Child rights perspective in crisis response and emergency planning



Project members from Shatsk and Västerås.

Shatsk is applying a child-rights perspective to crisis preparedness with support from Västerås, Sweden. A rights-based approach facilitates compliance and effective governance in relation to human rights commitments. It also provides a basis for accountability, with a framework to benchmark safety provision for children.

Municipal bomb shelters have been assessed for accessibility, safety, and suitability for continued learning, with findings incorporated into local planning documents. Teachers and staff are trained to interpret assessment results and communicate them to residents, while participatory tools—including surveys, focus groups, and exhibitions of children’s artwork—allow young people to express their experiences of war and displacement. This, in turn, informs trauma response programmes.

The municipality is extending rights-based assessments to other services where children are disproportionately affected, including temporary shelters for displaced families. Social programme oversight now incorporates child-rights screening tools to ensure initial



*Children's drawings of the War in Ukraine
Photo: Västerås Municipality*

3. Promoting social cohesion & resilient communities

Developing inclusive crisis coordination, civic competencies, and community-based recovery practices

Municipalities that are able to maintain inclusive, cohesive communities – even under conditions of displacement and crisis – contribute to the institutional stability expected of future EU Member States. Local communities in Ukraine face a high risk of foreign disinformation and manipulation, particularly under the ongoing Russian full-scale invasion and hybrid threats.

This often targets the cohesion and sense of community that is necessary to uphold a stable, functional society¹³. Municipalities can strengthen resilience by providing accurate information through trusted channels, by supporting local media, and providing community-based media literacy programmes in schools, libraries and civic centres. Securing digital infrastructure and clarifying responsibilities for information management during crises is critical, as is ensuring that public communication is transparent, timely and verifiable. Local governments can also integrate volunteer networks and community observers into early-warning systems for disinformation, while sharing patterns and incidents with regional or national authorities.

CASE:

Lidingö–Slavuta Strengthening civic resilience through education

Since 2022, the municipal partnership between Lidingö, Sweden, and Slavuta, Ukraine, has embedded civic, media, and digital competencies within local education systems.

The initiative recognises that civic competencies, information security, and community-based recovery practices are closely interlinked, and that schools and municipal actors play a central role in translating official information from state institutions into locally understood guidance, while also addressing misinformation circulating through families, social networks, and community channels.

In Slavuta, more than 4,000 students across all local schools have participated in structured activities focused on critical thinking, media literacy, and cybersecurity. Teachers have undertaken sustained professional development, leading to tangible changes in classroom practice: wider use of interactive and inquiry-based methods, integration of media literacy across subjects, and a shift from memorising facts towards complex analytical reasoning.

¹³ See for example Europol, *European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment – The changing DNA of serious and organised crime*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025; *The Hybrid Threats and Power Play Challenges Facing the European Union*, Note by General (2S) Jean-Marc Vigilant, IRIS chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ProgEurope_2025_01_menace-hybride_Vigilant_Note_EN.pdf; *The European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies* https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52025JC0791

The initiative directly addresses war-related information threats, where misleading or manipulated information can undermine public trust and community safety. Students are trained to analyse contemporary propaganda and digital manipulation and apply these skills both in school and in everyday life. Through families and community networks, these competencies extend beyond the classroom, supporting shared understandings of democracy, transparency, and safety.



Project members from Slavuta and Lidingö.

Summary

The practices below illustrate how municipal-level governance reforms contribute directly to the EU accession “Fundamentals” cluster – opened first and closed last in negotiations – which prioritises democratic institutions, rule of law, fundamental rights, and public administration reform¹⁴.

Method / Tool / Practice	What it strengthens	Relevant EU Accession Framework (Fundamentals Cluster)	Why this matters for EU accession
Structured youth dialogue	Inclusion of underrepresented groups; Regular, predictable citizen participation; democratic legitimacy; youth rights	Democratic Institutions; Chapter 23 (Judiciary & Fundamental Rights); Art. 10(3) TEU	Shows that local authorities can institutionalise participation and uphold democratic routines required for EU membership.
Digital tools for transparent reconstruction planning	Open decision-making; accountability; accessible information; responsiveness to returning residents	Public Administration Reform (PAR); Chapter 23 (Rule of Law & Fundamental Rights); Public Financial Management	Transparency and access to information underpin rule-of-law compliance and readiness for funded collaborations.
Digital mapping & standardised consultations in planning	Evidence-based policy-making; procedural consistency; public access to planning data	Public Administration Reform; Democratic Institutions; Chapter 23; Art. 10(3) TEU (participatory governance)	Predictable, open procedures demonstrate administrative readiness to apply EU-aligned governance standards.
Child-rights impact assessments in crisis preparedness	Rights-based governance; Institutional stability; coordination; vulnerable groups’ protection; non-discrimination	Democratic Institutions; Chapter 23 (Fundamental Rights); Art. 2 TEU; (equality, rights of minorities, dignity)	The EU requirement of stable, rights-respecting institutions expects candidates to uphold rights of vulnerable groups in all public policies including crisis governance
Civic & media literacy in local education	Informed participation; resilience to disinformation; equal access to democratic skills	Democratic Institutions; Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom & Security – resilience to hybrid threats); Art. 2 TEU	Citizens must be able to exercise democratic rights; implementing EU reforms require public acceptance and civic competence.
Inclusive civic-learning spaces for democratic values	Everyday democratic practice; community cohesion; value alignment	Democratic Institutions; Chapter 23 (Equality & Non-discrimination); Art. 2 TEU (democracy, equality, dignity)	EU-aligned values must be embedded in social norms, not only in institutions — essential for legitimacy of reforms.

¹⁴ See the *European Commission Revised Enlargement Methodology of 2020; the Enlargement Policy – Fundamentals First Principle, and the descriptions of Ch. 23 and Ch. 24* by DG NEAR and EU LEX.

Conclusion

Municipalities that institutionalise participation, accountability, and social cohesion are accelerating EU integration while building the democratic infrastructure that sustains democracy under pressure. The Ukrainian–Swedish municipal partnerships demonstrate how peer-to-peer cooperation strengthens concrete local capacities in three interlinked areas: structured citizen participation, transparent and rule-of-law-based governance, and community resilience to crisis and disinformation. Through youth councils, digital planning tools, rights-based assessments, and civic resilience education, municipalities embed EU-aligned practices in everyday routines, even in contexts of war, displacement, and institutional strain.

These three dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Participation increases legitimacy; transparent governance strengthens trust; and cohesive communities enhance institutional stability. Municipal partnerships accelerate this process by providing arenas for practical problem-solving, professional exchange, and institutional learning.

Crucially, they are not one-way transfer mechanisms. Ukrainian municipalities bring valuable experience in sustaining democratic procedures, service delivery, and social mobilisation under extreme pressure – knowledge that is increasingly relevant for European counterparts facing hybrid threats and democratic backsliding.

In this sense, municipal partnerships contribute directly to both Ukraine’s accession pathway and to the broader objectives of the European Democracy Shield, which calls for strengthening democratic resilience across the Union. European support frameworks would therefore benefit from greater sensitivity to Ukraine’s multi-level governance landscape and the differentiated impacts of the war on regional resource allocation, administrative capacity, and policy trade-offs. Strengthening direct engagement with municipalities – including through peer-to-peer exchanges, and cooperation with hromada associations – can foster more responsive and context-aware support. Moreover, prioritising municipal partnerships that reinforce local self-governance capacities can help ensure that reform ownership, service delivery improvements, and institutional learning are anchored within Ukraine’s communities themselves.

Recommendations

The following recommendations identify practical entry points for partnership-based capacity building for local governments, with support from EU and international partners, that strengthens local democratic governance in line with the EU Fundamentals and accelerates accession readiness.

1. Establish permanent participation channels Municipalities can reinforce local democracy by ensuring that the legally enshrined youth councils, and other community forums, are inclusive, practice deliberation and have real and sustained influence in municipal decision-making processes. A youth council needs a mandate and a budget, and engagement should extend beyond formal consultations to involve civil society organisations and informal networks, ensuring that diverse voices—including marginalised groups—are heard and influence local policies.

2. Integrate digital transparency tools into statutory planning processes Municipalities can leverage digital tools to facilitate citizen engagement in urban and spatial planning, such as online platforms for submitting proposals, interactive mapping of community priorities, and virtual consultation sessions. To make citizen participation part of the administrative routine, these tools should be complemented by staff training to ensure accessibility and effective use, enabling residents to see how their input shapes decisions.

3. Adopt rights-based assessments in crisis planning Municipalities should embed rights-based assessments such as child-rights assessments or vulnerability screenings into routine crisis preparedness and emergency planning. This ensures that shelters, services, and response measures are accessible, equitable, and do no harm to vulnerable groups, including displaced families, children, and minorities.

4. Institutionalise civic resilience education through schools and libraries Schools, libraries, and youth centres are key institutions for strengthening critical thinking, democratic values, and public trust. Integrating volunteer networks and promoting civic competencies, including media literacy and local counter-disinformation initiatives, is crucial in areas exposed to hybrid threats. By supporting teacher training, structured learning programmes, and community-based outreach, municipalities can ensure that resilience to information manipulation becomes a shared societal resource.

5. Document local governance innovations for accession reporting and donor alignment Ensure coherence with broader governance reforms and coordinate with regional and national authorities where appropriate. Documenting and sharing local experiences can support national policy development and provide tangible evidence of EU-aligned practices in participatory governance, accountability, and community resilience

Discussion questions for local governments

1. How can we strengthen democratic participation in our municipality?

- a. Can youth councils and community forums operate safely and inclusively despite war or displacement?
- b. Which local groups—particularly vulnerable or displaced populations—are not regularly included in decisionmaking, and how can we ensure their voices are heard?
- c. What mechanisms can be established to maintain citizen engagement even when normal governance channels are disrupted by crisis conditions?

2. How can we maintain transparency and accountability when access to government offices or public meetings is restricted by war or crisis conditions?

- a. Which digital tools for urban or spatial planning are realistic given current security, connectivity, and infrastructure limitations?
- b. What digital platforms exist to gather citizen input, and can remote consultations be reliably integrated into decision-making?

3. How can we strengthen social cohesion and trust in the community?

- a. How can volunteer networks, civil society, and local authorities coordinate to respond to both physical threats (e.g., attacks, infrastructure disruption) and information threats (disinformation, propaganda) in a timely and inclusive way?
- b. What practical measures can strengthen civic competencies and media literacy under conditions of insecurity, limited resources, and high information pressure?

4. How do we document and communicate the alignment between our local democratic development and EU principles?

- a. How are lessons from crisis-responsive participation, transparency, and resilience initiatives documented and communicated to regional and national authorities?
- b. Do we have the necessary staff time and expertise to identify progress and coordinate with EU networks?

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