

A NETWORK APPROACH TO DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE



The Sustainable development Goal 17, Partnerships for the Goals.

**How municipal partnerships collaborate across borders
to strengthen democratic practices in times of war**

Abstract

Local governments are among the institutions most heavily affected by war, because they sit at the intersection between citizens, public services, infrastructure, and crisis response. During crises and wars, municipalities are often responsible for maintaining essential services such as water, sanitation, schools, housing, emergency shelters, healthcare coordination, waste management, and support to displaced populations (IDPs).

Since 2022, Ukrainian local self-government authorities (LGs) find themselves at the forefront of a war that has placed renewed emphasis on their crisis preparedness and resilience. The International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) has within its mandate to support municipal partnerships created the Network for Democratic Resilience (DR Network) in order to address and strengthen LGs crisis management and democratic capabilities in Sweden and in Ukraine.

The purpose of this publication is to gather the project results of the partnerships, to provide inspiration for future collaborations and to highlight the network approach as a meaningful and effective working method within international collaborations.

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INTRODUCTION

“We find that hromadas, which have more physical and discursive spaces for public engagement, perform slightly better in terms of crisis preparedness.”

Keudel, 2023, Local democracy and Resilience in Ukraine: Learning from Communities’ Crisis Response in War, P. 39

The importance of support for the local level can not be emphasized enough, especially when it comes to building and upholding democratic structures in times of crises. National governments set policy, but local governments deliver services on the ground. UNDP notes that the local level is the natural arena for recovery, resilience-building, and restoring governance in conflict-affected societies.¹ For most citizens, the local municipality is the government they interact with daily. When local authorities continue to provide services during conflict, public trust and democratic legitimacy are strengthened. When services fail, trust in democratic institutions often declines. Studies from Ukraine show that local governments have played a crucial role in maintaining resilience by continuing service delivery and coordinating crisis responses during the full-scale invasion.²

ICLD has a mandate to support and gather LGs in international municipal partnerships in thematic networks in their strive to strengthen participation, equity, transparency and accountability in their communities.

This publication focuses specifically on one of them, the Network for Democratic Resilience (DR Network). The DR Network consists of fifteen Swedish-Ukrainian municipal partnerships who all worked in projects from 2024-2026 with the goal of achieving long term institutional change within the field of local democracy and crisis preparedness.

In 2026, the DR Network comes to an end but the work that has been done and the results that have been achieved are profound. The purpose of this publication is to document the different approaches and learnings from the partnerships, to contribute to the dissemination of project results, and to create a knowledge bank with inspiration for future international municipal cooperation.

The aim is to accumulate information about working methods, challenges, and results in the projects of the partnerships. The material consists of project reports and interviews with each of the partnerships, reports from the mentors, and observations from network meetings. One aim of the publication is to

¹ <https://digitalguides.undp.org/guide/core-government-functions-and-local-governance-in-crisis> and:

https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Guide_Local_Governance_in_Fragile_and_Conflict_Settings.pdf

² Rabinovych, M., Brik, T., Darkovich, A., Savisko, M., Hatsk entralised crisis response during the Russo-Ukrainian war. *Journal of Public Finance and Public Choice*, 1(aop), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1332/25156918Y2023D000000002>

o, V., Tytiuk, S., & Piddubnyi, I. (2023). Explaining Ukraine’s resilience to Russia’s invasion: The role of local governance. *Governance*, 1(20). <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12827> and: Keudel, O., & Huss, O. (2023). Polycentric governance in practice: The case of Ukraine’s decentralised crisis response during the Russo-Ukrainian war. *Journal of Public Finance and Public Choice*, 1(aop), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1332/25156918Y2023D000000002>

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demonstrate how these local partnership projects contribute to enhanced democratic resilience. This publication starts with a definition of democratic resilience, the ICLD working methods, and the history of the DR Network. All ICLD working methods are anchored and backed up by academic research.

The Ukrainian related research has been mainly done in collaboration with the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE), and it is presented in the second section of this publication.

The main body is comprised of case studies of all the fifteen partnerships and their thematically clustered projects. The publication ends with concluding remarks aimed at municipalities and other stakeholders who might be interested in getting started with a similar network, project, or partnership.

Additionally there is an appendix, gathering all the ICLD-funded research related to democratic resilience and the local level.

Defining Democratic Resilience

At ICLD, the concept of democratic resilience refers to the ability of a political system, especially at the local level, to withstand challenges, adapt to crises, and continue functioning without compromising its core democratic values, institutions, and processes. In ICLD's understanding, democratic resilience is closely linked to the strength of local democracy.

It is not only about surviving shocks such as conflict, political instability, or societal crises, but about maintaining and reinforcing democratic practices during such periods. This includes ensuring that governance remains inclusive, transparent, and accountable even under pressure. A key aspect of the concept is that local resilience is built through long-term, structural change rather than temporary solutions. ICLD emphasises that strengthening democratic institutions, processes, and capacities at the municipal level creates societies that are better equipped to handle future challenges. This is also backed up by the research done in cooperation between the ICLD and the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE).

THE NETWORK FOR DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE



Photo from Network meeting in Sarajevo 2024

Since 2024, the Democratic Resilience (DR) Network brings together 30 municipalities from all over Sweden and Ukraine in a shared mission: to strengthen democratic institutions and practices and build resilient societies, especially in times of war or crisis.

The network is powered by the dedication and engagement of all 30 municipalities, whose commitment to collaboration and democracy drives tangible, lasting change. At the heart of the network are three pillars: the municipal partnerships themselves, ICLD's project planning methods, and research on democratic resilience conducted by KSE.

Together, these elements provide a solid foundation for meaningful, long-term impact. The Network enables municipalities to carry out projects that go beyond temporary solutions,

aiming for structural changes that strengthen both local democracy and societal resilience. All projects are guided by ICLD's core values: equity, participation, transparency, and accountability.

Peer learning at the heart

Peer learning as a method lies at the heart of the network. Municipalities exchange experiences, insights, and strategies both within each partnership and across the network. Through this interregional collaboration, knowledge is shared, capacities are strengthened, and democratic practices are reinforced.

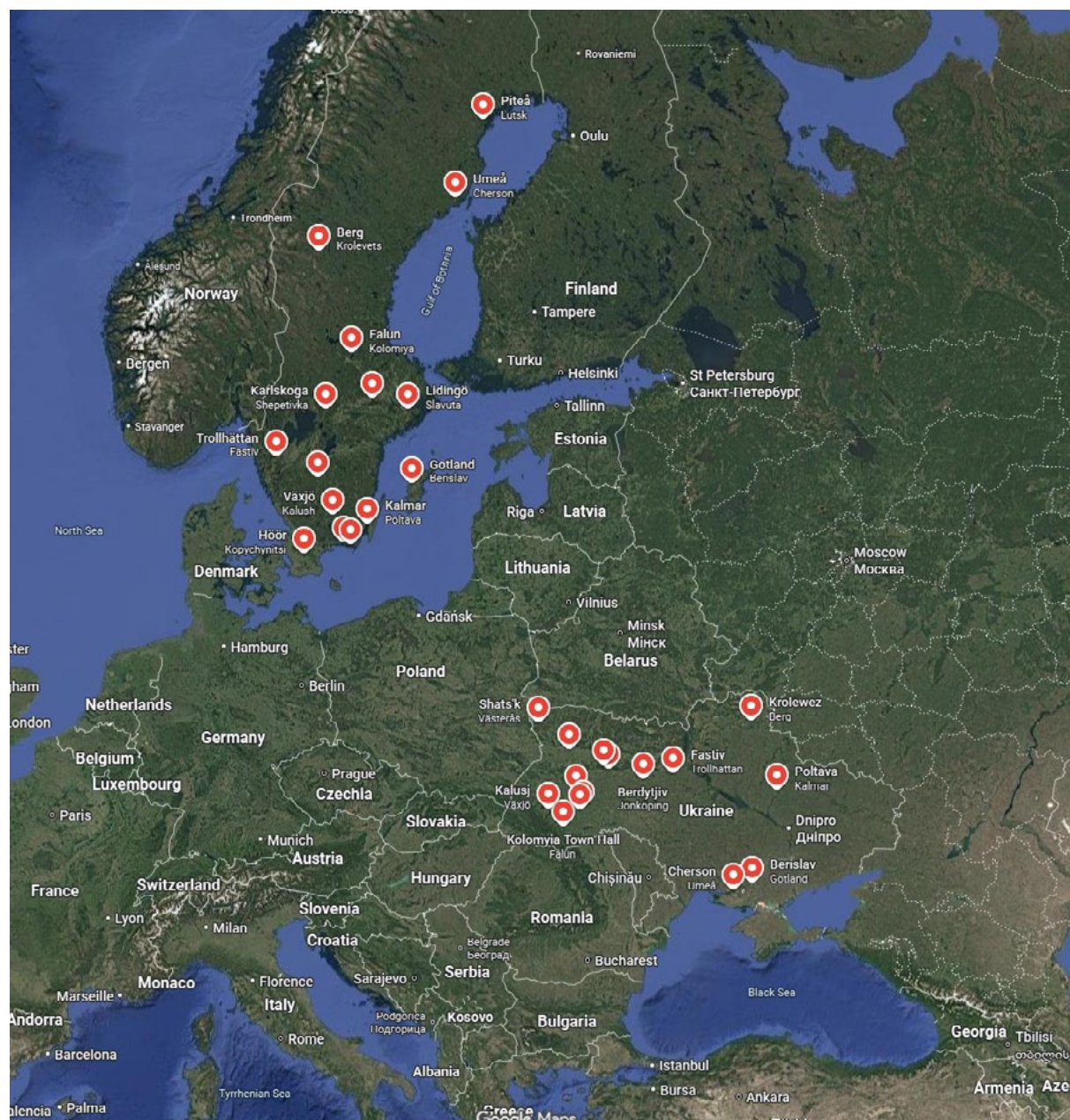
Between 2024 and 2026, the DR partnerships focused on strengthening democratic initiatives, promoting social cohesion, and ensuring inclusive governance.

Support for Ukraine's EU-accession

The DR Network actively supports Ukraine's EU-accession by promoting implementation of EU principles at the local level.

These activities help local municipalities align with a broad spectrum of EU standards ranging from public procurement and human rights protection to waste management.¹

¹ https://cdn.icld.se/wp-content/uploads/20260507160129/ICLD_Policybrief_37_WEB.pdf



The geographical spread of the municipalities in the DR Network

The ICLD Network Approach

In the ICLD Municipal Partnership Programme, network meetings are an integrated part of how the programme functions. The foundation of the programme are the bilateral partnerships between Swedish municipalities or regions and a counterpart in another country. Within these partnerships, participants work together over a longer period on jointly defined projects, focusing on mutual learning and the practical strengthening of local democracy. Building on this, ICLD connects several partnerships within thematic and regional networks. These networks bring together participants who are working on similar issues or operating in comparable contexts, which creates opportunities through peer learning and study visits beyond the individual partnership. Through the network meetings representatives from different partnerships come together in workshops, trainings, or conferences.

During these meetings, participants share experiences, discuss challenges, and reflect on their ongoing work, which allows them to learn from a broader range of cases than their own partnership alone. The meetings are also designed to include structured training elements, often facilitated by experts, researchers, or programme staff, and tailored to the needs of the participants. In this way, the meetings both deepen knowledge and provide practical tools that can be applied directly in partnerships.

At the same time, network meetings contribute to improving the quality of the partnership projects. They create space for reflection, help participants refine their approaches, and support the integration of cross-cutting perspectives such as gender equality, human rights, and environmental sustainability. Beyond the immediate project work, they also foster longer-term professional

relationships and communities of practice that can continue beyond the programme itself. The partnerships provide depth and context-specific change, while the networks and their meetings enable wider exchange, shared learning, and stronger overall results across all participating municipalities.

The network meetings

The DR Network specifically met five times over a period of three years. The first meeting, held in Sarajevo, focused on anti-corruption, gender equality, and post-conflict recovery. Special attention was given to lessons learned from the countries of the former Yugoslavia and how different approaches to reconstruction and reconciliation after the civil wars have shaped democratic development.

The second meeting, in Brussels, deepened the participants' knowledge about EU integration and how to work with it on the local level.

The third meeting was held in Umeå, where the participants received lectures on inclusive urban planning.

The fourth meeting was held in Tallinn and focused on Estonia's transformation from a former Soviet state to a member of the EU and NATO. The participants learned about democratic reforms, digitalisation, local governance, and how Estonia has worked strategically with European integration and resilience-building following independence.

The fifth and final meeting was held in Stockholm, where the partnerships were given the opportunity to present and disseminate their project results and to network with stakeholders.

The DR Mentors

One essential part of the networks are the network mentors. Each ICLD network is supported by experienced mentors who accompany the partnerships throughout their learning journey, helping participants reflect on challenges, exchange experiences, and translate ideas into practical action. The mentors bring expertise from local governance, democracy, sustainable development, and international cooperation, while also creating spaces for dialogue, trust-building, and peer learning across municipalities.

The DR Network specifically had four mentors located in Ukraine with three to four assigned partnerships each. Together, the mentors help create a supportive learning environment where municipalities can learn from one another, strengthen their democratic resilience, and build partnerships that continue long after individual projects have ended.



The ICLD Mentors Kristina and Maria.

“Being a mentor in this network has meant witnessing how the first careful conversations between municipalities grow into genuine partnerships, friendships, and long-term commitments.”

- Krisitna Levytska



The ICLD Mentors Valentyna and Mariya.

“Being part of this network reminded me how much local governments can learn from each other when there is openness, empathy, and a shared commitment to communities. Despite very different local contexts, many challenges and values remain shared.”

- Valentina Triukhan

“I choose to be a mentor because I believe that a peaceful, inclusive, and prosperous future can only be achieved when dedicated people work together, guided by shared values and a commitment to meaningful development. Mentorship is my way of supporting this vision and helping others create lasting impact.”

- Maria Tyshchenko

“I see mentoring as a space for reflection and continuous learning, where challenges can be openly discussed and turned into opportunities for growth. In contexts of crisis and uncertainty, mentoring becomes even more meaningful, as it supports municipalities in staying focused on democratic values, inclusion, and sustainable development while building resilience and mutual understanding through international cooperation.”

- Mariya Tuzyk

THE DR NETWORK

INTEGRATED RESEARCH

The DR Network and the Ukraine-focused research by ICLD are closely interconnected, forming a unique model where research, practice, and international co-operation reinforce each other. The DR Network is built on three pillars: municipal partnerships, structured peer learning, and research on democratic resilience developed together with the Kyiv School of Economics (KSE).

The preliminary findings of a study conducted by Keudel/KSE provided the first empirical cues about LSGs response practices. LSGs reported that public engagement, co-production and collaborative governance became the main mechanisms contributing to local problem solving in Ukraine.¹ These findings have been laying the ground for the DR partnerships and have confirmed the ICLD working hypothesis that democratic practices on the local level are highly relevant for effective crisis preparedness and resilience.

The research project “Local Democracy and Resilience in Ukraine: Learning from Communities’ Crisis Response in War” provides scientific confirmation. It shows that local self-governments have played a decisive role in Ukraine’s resilience during the Russian invasion, maintaining essential services, supporting defense efforts, and mobilizing communities despite extreme conditions.²

A key finding is that democratic practices such as participation, transparency, accountability, and collaboration with civil society are to be upheld in crisis, because they significantly strengthen resilience. Ukrainian municipalities have engaged citizens, NGOs, and businesses in decision-making and crisis response, demonstrating that decentralized and participatory governance can improve adaptability and legitimacy even under wartime conditions.

The research also highlights practical mechanisms behind this resilience, including:

- Collaborative governance between local authorities and stakeholders
- Use of digital tools and community spaces to maintain communication
- Adaptation strategies such as relocating operations and managing resource shortages
- Ongoing challenges, particularly coordination with central government and limited resources

¹ Oleksandra Keudel, Valentyn Hatsko, Andrii Darkovich and Oksana Huss, Local Democracy and Resilience in Ukraine: Learning from Communities’ Crisis Response in War: <https://icld.se/en/publications/local-democracy-and-resilience-in-ukraine-learning-from-communities-crisis-response-in-war/>

² ICLD Local Democracy and Resilience in Ukraine: Learning from Communities’ Crisis Response in War (Research Project webpage): <https://icld.se/en/researchproject/local-democracy-and-resilience-in-ukraine-learning-from-communities-crisis-response-in-war/>

Importantly, the outcomes of the research are not only academic. They are translated into policy recommendations, toolboxes, and guidance for municipalities, directly feeding into the DR Network's activities.

This allows participating municipalities to apply evidence-based methods in their partnerships and local governance work.

In summary, the DR partnerships and their projects backed up by this research demonstrate that local democracy is a key driver of societal resilience. By combining research insights with practical approaches such as peer learning and international cooperation, the network enables municipalities across borders to learn from Ukraine's crisis response and apply these lessons to strengthen democratic governance in both crisis and non-crisis contexts.



The participants in the DR Network visiting the European Commission.

THE MUNICIPAL PARTNERSHIPS

The DR Network is part of the ICLD municipal partnership programme which aims to reduce poverty by promoting democratic and functional local and regional institutions, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

The aim of the programme is to provide citizens with opportunities to influence local and regional political processes and promote increased participation, equity, transparency, and accountability in local decision-making¹

the participant, organisational and societal level. When granted funding, the partnerships are to report and keep the municipal programme officers up to date on changes at each of these levels.

If the chosen societal challenge addresses at least one of these core values, their project application is eligible for ICLD funding. The change that a partnership strives to achieve ought to impact

The societal change within the partnership is scientifically anchored in the so called Theory of Change.

¹ ICLD Democratic Resilience Network: <https://icld.se/en/networks/democratic-resilience>

What is a Theory of Change?

In its simplest form, developing a theory of change is about identifying how (and why) you think A will lead to B, if B is the desired state or change that you'd like to see in society. Crucially, it provides you with a way to better understand why you're making progress and where you might be going wrong.

In practical terms, a theory of change involves being explicit about your expectations regarding multiple sequences of intermediate impacts and outcomes. For example, doing A should produce B, which in turn will result in C; and doing X will impact Y, which in turn will have a positive effect on Z.

It also involves being explicit about the reasons and assumptions underpinning your expectations. For example, why do you think A will lead to B, which in turn will result in C? Why do you think X will impact Y, and why do you think this will in turn positively affect Z?

The ICLD Project Planning Workbook – a science based approach

When applying for a grant, partnerships go through a process that starts with an inception phase, during which they are required to work intensely with their international partner on a refined problem. As a support but also to streamline applications and make sure that all partnerships fulfill the criteria for the grant, the project team works with the ICLD project planning workbook. The workbook is a thorough, research based tool, ensuring that all team have reflected upon the societal challenge they want to work with, to come up with effective long term solutions and in the end to maximise the projects impact and feasibility.²

The workbook gives a short explanation of why a diverse team is important and explains the concept of the Theory of Change. One important aspect of that approach is that using a theory of change allows taking context into account when finding and describing societal challenges.³

The workbook determines the project planning process and starts with finding a local societal problem to address, that also must fit into the eligibility criteria stated in the municipal partnership programme guidelines.⁴

The partnerships within the DR Network also had to more specifically explain how their project not only adheres to the four core values in the programme guidelines but also how working with these will improve resilience on the local level. In the end it turned out that most partnerships chose to work within one of three main thematic areas, which is why they can be divided into thematic clusters.

Thematic clusters in the DR Network

The three main thematic clusters in the DR Network are inclusive urban planning, youth inclusion and inclusive education, all of them having an impact on the development of local democracy and resilience and contributing to alignment with EU-accession criteria. The chapter about the partnerships is therefore divided into three thematical subchapters in which the related partnerships are presented accordingly.



Network meeting in Brussels 2024.

² ICLD Project Planning Workbook <https://icld.se/en/publications/workbook-for-project-planning/>

³ ICLD Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL): Theory of Change: <https://icld.se/sv/icld-monitoring-evaluation-and-learning-mel/>

⁴ ICLD Municipal Partnership Programme Guidelines, p. 4, <https://cdn.icld.se/wp-content/uploads/20250922105219/Guidelines-Municipal-Partnership-program-2024-12-13-eng.pdf>

INCLUSIVE URBAN PLANNING

The partnerships between Umeå–Kherson, Jönköping–Berdychiv, Ronneby–Ternopil, Västerås–Shatsk and Kalmar–Poltava focus on constructing and reconstructing public spaces with an emphasis on accessibility and citizen participation. In this work, urban planning is treated not only as a technical task but as a democratic process.

The municipalities collaborate to ensure that urban development takes into account the needs of all groups, especially those with limited access to public space or decision-making.

This includes developing participatory planning methods, strengthening dialogue between authorities and citizens, and creating opportunities for broader public involvement. In general, Swedish partners contribute with sharing their experience in inclusive planning and participatory governance, while Ukrainian municipalities bring knowledge from working in crisis and recovery contexts. This exchange helps adapt approaches to local conditions and changing needs.

Overall, the partnerships show how inclusive urban planning can support democratic resilience by making reconstruction processes more participatory, transparent, and equitable, while also strengthening trust, social cohesion, and local democracy.

Umeå – Kherson: “Building better Cities together”

The partnership between Umeå and Kherson, under the theme “Building Better Cities Together,” demonstrates how local democracy can be strengthened even under the most challenging conditions. Kherson is heavily impacted by the war, parts of it still being under Russian mili-

tary occupation, parts of it being recontested by Ukraine. It is constantly subject to drones and shelling of civilian targets. Despite these circumstances, the project team has managed to travel, meet their partners, and attend all of the network meetings, in order to create a structure for rebuilding Kherson after the war. At its core, the collaboration focuses on advancing inclusive urban planning through citizen dialogue, ensuring that residents, despite displacement and crisis, remain central to shaping the future of their city.

A key achievement of the partnership has been the development of an open-source digital platform that allows citizens to explore city maps and provide direct feedback on planned developments. In Kherson’s context, where the majority of residents have been forced to flee due to the ongoing war, this tool is more than just a technical innovation. It is a democratic lifeline. It enables displaced citizens to stay connected to their city and actively contribute to its reconstruction.

With support from Umeå and the Finnish city of Vaasa, Kherson is currently finalizing a comprehensive digital reconstruction and development plan, which will serve as a guiding framework for future spatial planning. The project places particular emphasis on inclusion, especially groups that are often overlooked in reconstruction processes. Children and youth are actively targeted to ensure that their perspectives are reflected in

long-term planning. At the same time, Kherson has taken deliberate steps to avoid digital exclusion by complementing online tools with paper-based surveys, particularly to reach elderly citizens. Early survey findings reveal a strong and shared aspiration among residents for a Kherson that is aligned with EU standards, both in terms of values and urban planning.



The Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Umeå with the Mayor of Kherson

On an organisational level, the partnership has contributed to strengthening policy planning and participatory governance. Kherson has developed new approaches to collecting public input, combining both broad and targeted questions to better understand citizens' priorities. Looking ahead, the partnership plans to launch a gender-focused citizen dialogue toolbox, further reinforcing its commitment to inclusive and equitable governance.

A significant driver of progress in the partnership has been being part of a network of municipalities working on similar challenges.

As the Umeå team reflects:

"The challenges we work on together with Kherson, urban analysis, democratic planning under conditions of crisis, are not unique to us, and the network gives us a structure for seeing how other municipalities approach the same questions in different ways."

Being part of the DR network has accelerated learning and broadened perspectives. The partners highlight that:

"When several partnerships share a room and a problem, half-formed ideas get tested, refined, or discarded much faster than they would in our own meetings."

This exchange has not only strengthened methods but also positioned the partnership within a wider European context of municipalities working on democratic resilience, while also fostering new collaborations with other Swedish municipalities. The partnership's contribution to local democratic resilience lies in its focus on developing practical and transferable working methods for inclusion.

As described by the team:

"We have developed working methods for inclusion through, for example, methodological support... By working with long-term planning, a foundation is created for transparent development that is based on a clear and communicable vision."

This long-term perspective helps create transparency and trust, making it easier for citizens to understand decision-making processes and the prioritization of resources, which is an essential factor in rebuilding confidence in public institutions, particularly in post-crisis contexts.

Overall, the Umeå–Kherson partnership illustrates how digital innovation, inclusive participation, and international collaboration can come

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together to support democratic development. Despite the ongoing war, the project not only contributes to rebuilding physical infrastructure but also strengthens the democratic foundations necessary for a resilient and inclusive future. This is also supported by research showing that local democracy can strengthen crisis recovery when municipalities work openly with residents, civil society, and other partners. The Umeå–Kherson partnership follows this logic by using inclusion, long-term planning, and shared learning to build trust and resilience.

Jönköping – Berdychiv: “Inclusive Urban Planning”

The partnership between Jönköping and Berdychiv focuses on strengthening citizen participation and digital innovation in urban planning using and developing digital GIS tools. While Berdychiv already had technical foundations for city planning in place, the collaboration has increasingly integrated democratic tools and participatory approaches to ensure that urban development becomes more transparent, inclusive, and citizen oriented.

A central ambition of the project is to make urban planning in Berdychiv more participatory and accessible, particularly in the development of new urban districts. Through the partnership, both municipalities have explored how digital tools and citizen dialogue can strengthen local democracy and improve trust between residents and local authorities. One key insight has been that Swedish urban planning standards cannot simply be transferred directly to the Ukrainian context. Instead, solutions need to be adapted to



Project leaders from Jönköping and Berdychiv.

local realities, reconstruction needs, and wartime conditions.

One of the most important methodological tools introduced through the project is MyPlace, originally developed in Malmö, which is designed to engage young people in urban planning processes. The method focuses on involving youth directly in discussions about their local environment and future city development. At the same time, Berdychiv is developing its own digital citizen engagement application, expected to launch by the end of the year. To ensure regular public use, the app will combine citizen dialogue features with practical everyday services such as utility payments and public transport information.

The partnership has also developed strong connections with academia. Jönköping University's School of Engineering is actively involved in the project and plans to use geographical data generated through the cooperation in its GIS edu-

cation and courses. In addition, the Department of Game Design at Campus Gotland has shown interest in the project, demonstrating how the partnership is beginning to create broader interdisciplinary collaborations around urban planning and participation.

An important aspect of the project is its contribution to knowledge sharing within the wider network. The Jönköping–Berdychiv partnership has actively shared its methods and experiences with other partnerships, including supporting the Umeå–Kherson collaboration through methodological exchange during network meetings. This demonstrates how the network enables municipalities to learn from one another, scale up successful approaches, and develop new collaborations.

The cooperation has also challenged assumptions on both sides. Representatives from Jönköping expressed surprise at the advanced level of digitalisation in Ukraine, particularly the widespread

use of digital ID systems & digital public services.

At the same time, training materials developed in Jönköping on urban planning, visualisation, and digital information management have been translated and subtitled into Ukrainian, making them accessible to urban planning specialists in Berdychiv and potentially other Ukrainian municipalities involved in reconstruction efforts.

Participation in the broader ICLD thematic network has been highly valuable for the partnership. As one representative described it:

“The most valuable is that we have gained colleagues that we can talk to and ask for advice, not only now but, we hope, in the future as well.”

Among the most valuable activities have been study visits and professional training exchanges. During the collaboration, specialists from Jönköping trained staff in Berdychiv in GIS technologies and systems use, strengthening technical competencies not only within the project team



Partnervisit by Berdychiv team in Jönköping and the The Municipal Council. Photo: Jönköpings kommun

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but across the entire Department of Architecture and Urban Planning. The partnership also benefited from learning opportunities with other municipalities in the network. As one participant reflected:

“We learned from Vaasa how child-friendly urban planning works... it was impressive to learn how they use children’s vision and really hear their voices.”

The project also contributes directly to societal resilience in crisis conditions. One important exchange happened via the project “points of invincibility” — emergency support hubs used during wartime to provide electricity, communication, and basic services.

Overall, the Jönköping–Berdychiv partnership demonstrates how digital innovation, participatory urban planning, and international peer learning can strengthen democratic resilience. By combining technical expertise with citizen engagement and cross-sector collaboration, the project contributes to more transparent, inclusive, and resilient local governance in both municipalities.

Ronneby – Ternopil: “Water for Life”

The partnership between Ronneby and Ternopil under the theme “Water for Life,” highlights the critical role of sustainable water management in strengthening local democratic resilience. By focusing on access to clean water and effective stormwater management, the collaboration addresses both environmental challenges, the need for inclusive, community-oriented governance.

Recognizing the complexity of water-related issues, both municipalities have actively involved technical experts and local stakeholders. Engineers, municipal staff, and civil society organizations have participated in a structured peer-learning process, exchanging knowledge on water management practices and challenges.

Through seminars and staff exchanges, the partners have developed a deeper understanding of how stormwater impacts different population groups and how to identify those most vulnerable. Ternopil has taken important steps in mapping vulnerable groups and involving them in water-related dialogue, while Ronneby contributes with experience in public education and outreach, helping to develop communication methods that can be adapted to the Ukrainian context.

Despite differences in geography and infrastructure, both cities face similar challenges related to increasingly intense rainfall and water system stress. A key insight from the partnership is that small-scale, locally adapted solutions based on detailed, site-specific analysis can be effective across different contexts. At the same time, the ongoing war in Ukraine means additional pressure.

In response to frequent power outages, Ternopil has installed public water pump stations and, with support from Ronneby, uses generators to maintain water supply during blackouts. These efforts illustrate how technical solutions and international cooperation can directly support community resilience in crisis situations. Participating in a broader thematic partnership network has significantly strengthened the collaboration.

As the partners explain:

“Participating in a partnership network is... an opportunity to step beyond the local context and view shared challenges from a different perspective.”

The network has enabled a synergy of experience, where solutions developed in one municipality can be adapted in another, accelerating implementation and improving outcomes. It has also provided institutional support and solidarity, helping the partnership move from ad hoc humanitarian efforts toward more structured, long-term project work. Importantly, the network has amplified Ternopil’s voice internationally, increasing visibility and opening opportunities for further funding and cooperation. Among the various partnership activities, study visits and direct peer-to-peer exchange have proven to be the most impactful.

These formats allow participants to observe municipal systems in practice and gain hands-on insights into governance and technical solutions.

As highlighted by the partners:

“During these visits, we have the opportunity to see the mechanics of municipal operations from the inside... This allowed us to build more effective communication with international donors and adapt best administrative practices within our community.”

This practical learning has been particularly valuable in understanding European standards for transparency, accountability, and civic engagement, and in adapting these practices to Ternopil’s local context under challenging conditions. The partnership’s contribution to democratic resilience is closely linked to its focus on transparency, inclusion, and trust-building.

The partners describe democratic resilience as:

“The community’s ability not just to survive, but to develop while remaining faithful to democratic values.”

This is reflected in several key areas. First, the project strengthens accountable leadership by promoting transparent reporting and visible results of international cooperation. Second, it supports youth engagement through educational



Study visit at waste water infrastructure of Ternopil in Ronneby. Photo: Ronneby kommun

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initiatives and international exchanges, fostering a sense of belonging to a broader European community. Finally, it builds horizontal connections between authorities, civil society, and residents.

As the partners note, when citizens see tangible outcomes of cooperation, their trust in local governance increases, forming the foundation of a stable and resilient local democracy. The importance of trust and its impact on crisis preparedness and resilience have also been underlined by Oleksandra Keudel and Co. in one of their most recent research on local democracy, social cohesion and resilience.

Overall, the Ronneby–Ternopil partnership demonstrates how environmental sustainability, technical expertise, and participatory governance can be integrated into a cohesive approach to local development. By combining practical solutions with inclusive dialogue and international learning, the project not only addresses urgent water challenges but also contributes to stronger, more transparent, and more resilient local communities. It is unique in the sense that it links environmental and social factors to local crisis resilience, and there are already results showing that these factors are strengthening and reinforcing each other.

Västerås – Shatsk: “A Safer Future for Children”

The partnership between Västerås and Shatsk places children’s rights at the center of local democratic resilience, with a particular focus on children’s safety during war and crisis. Through a combination of knowledge exchange, civic en-

gagement, and practical preparedness initiatives, the partnership has developed into a broad and strategic collaboration aimed at strengthening both institutional capacity and community resilience.

A core area of the project is the development of child-centered approaches to crisis preparedness, particularly regarding bomb shelters and psychosocial support. Inspired by Swedish practices around child rights assessments, a bomb shelter in Shatsk has been redesigned from a child rights perspective. The partnership has also contributed to increased awareness among politicians and civil servants in Västerås about the realities faced by children in wartime, especially in relation to education, safety, and trauma.

The collaboration combines practical support with long-term institutional learning. A donation campaign in Västerås led to the delivery of a sky lift to Shatsk, directly responding to local needs. At the same time, the partnership has worked extensively with citizen dialogue and inclusion, collecting feedback from residents and conducting needs assessments to strengthen democratic participation and ensure that vulnerable groups are considered in local planning.

A particularly important dimension of the project has been the focus on psychosocial support for children. Staff in Shatsk received training in creative writing and art-based approaches as forms of psychological first aid, methods that have already been tested in the local art school.

The partnership has also explored trauma-informed educational approaches, including cooperation with Save the Children and the use of the

Creative Drawing Teaching Module (“the Butterfly Method”). Participation in the ICLD thematic network has played a major role in shaping the partnership.

In the early stages, the network helped provide a common understanding of the Ukrainian context and the democratic challenges linked to war and EU integration. As the Västerås team explains:

“The network gave us a common foundation when we started our cooperation.”

For the Ukrainian partners, the network has been especially important as a source of practical learning and inspiration. Representatives from Shatsk emphasized how valuable it was to compare systems and approaches with Swedish municipalities:

“We understand that our legislation is very similar. For example, in the area of protecting children’s rights. But in our case these mechanisms do not work as perfectly and clearly, like clockwork, as they do for our colleagues from Sweden.”

Among the most valuable activities have been study visits and peer-learning exchanges, where professionals could discuss concrete cases and operational challenges directly with colleagues.

These exchanges provided practical insight into Swedish systems for child protection, governance, and preparedness, while also creating opportunities for mutual reflection and adaptation of methods. The partnership’s contribution to democratic resilience is closely connected to its emphasis on child-centered governance and transparent institutional processes.



Support event for Ukraine in the City of Västerås. Photo: Västerås Stad

INCLUSIVE URBAN PLANNING

Shatsk representatives were particularly impressed by how systematically children's rights are integrated into Swedish decision-making:

"All issues — budget adoption and even matters such as enrolling a child in an educational institution or kindergarten — everything is planned from the very beginning so that the child's rights are not violated later on."

This perspective has inspired efforts within Shatsk to gradually strengthen child rights considerations across local governance processes, including greater participation in committee discussions where decisions may indirectly affect children.

In Västerås, the project has also led to broader societal engagement around preparedness and children's rights. Public seminars, collaboration with Europe Direct, media outreach, and events together with organizations such as the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency have increased awareness of the realities children face in war and crisis situations. Discussions have also been held with the Swedish government regarding children's conditions during wartime and the importance of accessible and inclusive bomb shelters.



Partnervisit by Shatsk team in Västerås. Photo: Västerås stad

Looking ahead, the partnership intends to continue building these foundations. Planned activities include a summer camp for children from Shatsk, public events connected to the documentary “The War They Play” about kidnapped Ukrainian children, and further exploration of future cooperation opportunities through programs such as Erasmus+, Urbact, CERV, and the Swedish Institute.

Perhaps most importantly, partnership has created a deep sense of solidarity and mutual support. As the Ukrainian partners expressed:

“What is very important... is the support that we constantly feel during every visit. The understanding that we are not alone.”

Overall, the Västerås–Shatsk partnership demonstrates how child rights, preparedness, psychosocial support, and democratic participation can be integrated into a comprehensive approach to local resilience. Through practical cooperation, institutional learning, and human connection, the partnership contributes not only to safer communities, but also to stronger democratic cultures capable of withstanding crisis and uncertainty.

Kalmar – Poltava: “Equal preparedness and Civil Defense”

The partnership between Kalmar and Poltava focuses on strengthening public health and emergency preparedness as a way of building resilient and sustainable local communities. Despite the immense pressures caused by the ongoing war in Ukraine, the collaboration has already contributed to tangible local development and increased preparedness in Poltava.

A defining feature of the partnership is its strong emphasis on civil society involvement, combined with academic support from Malmö University,

ensuring that the work is both community-oriented and research-based.

At the core of the collaboration is the ambition to make local emergency services more accessible and effective, while simultaneously strengthening democratic governance and citizen participation. Educational initiatives within the project are designed to involve residents broadly, and the partnership seeks to develop innovative models for cooperation between municipalities, emergency services, academia, and civil society actors.

Participation in the thematic partnership network has been central to the development of collaboration. For the Ukrainian partners, the network initially served as a platform for establishing meaningful international cooperation.

As Nadia Harabordo from Poltava explains:

“For us, it became a kind of foundation, a platform... Here, we can actually begin implementing our cooperation in practice and then expand the boundaries of that cooperation.”

Roman Chyrkunda from Poltava adds that the network brings together municipalities that are genuinely motivated to develop and exchange experiences:

“Cities that want to change, develop, and exchange experience join such networks and look for partner cities.”

This shared ambition has helped create a strong connection between Kalmar and Poltava, where both sides are interested not only in supporting one another, but also in learning from each other’s experiences of governance, resilience, and crisis management.

Among the most valuable activities have been study visits, seminars, and peer-learning exchanges, which allowed participants to observe practical municipal operations firsthand. The first study visits to Kalmar proved especially impor-

INCLUSIVE URBAN PLANNING

tant in shaping the project's direction. During visits to municipal structures and Kalmar's rescue services, the Poltava delegation identified emergency preparedness and rescue services as a shared area of interest with strong relevance for both municipalities.

As Nadia Harabordo describes:

"We clearly chose a topic that would be interesting for both sides"

The exchanges also highlighted mutual learning opportunities. While Poltava gained insight into Swedish rescue services and organizational structures, Kalmar showed strong interest in under-

standing how Poltava manages local governance and emergency response under wartime conditions. This reciprocal exchange has become a key strength of the partnership.

Poltava has been implementing several methods to make local governance more participatory.

These mechanisms include public hearings, consultations, online voting platforms, youth councils, and councils for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Poltava has also updated its municipal charter with support from the United Nations, embedding democratic participation and transparent decision-making more firmly into local governance structures.



Poltava visiting its partner municipality, Kalmar. Photo: Kalmar kommun

Through the partnership, these experiences have not only been strengthened internally but also shared internationally. The collaboration with Kalmar has created opportunities to reflect on democratic processes from new perspectives and exchange methods for strengthening trust, participation, and resilience at the local level.

Beyond the practical outcomes, the partnership has also fostered strong personal and institutional relationships.

Overall, the Kalmar–Poltava partnership demonstrates how public health, emergency preparedness, democratic participation, and international cooperation can reinforce one another in times of crisis.

By combining practical exchange with long-term institutional learning and civic engagement, the partnership contributes not only to stronger emergency services, but also to more resilient democratic communities capable of facing future challenges together.



Study visit at the emergency service in Kalmar. Photo: Kalmar kommun

YOUTH INCLUSION

The partnerships of Höör-Kopychyntsi, Trollhättan – Fastiv, Berg-Krolevets, Växjö-Kalush, Falun-Kolomiya, Piteå-Lutsk and Gotland- Berislav work with youth inclusion by strengthening young people’s opportunities to participate in local decision-making, particularly in contexts affected by crisis and societal change. The approach is based on the idea that resilient democracies require the active involvement of younger generations, not only as future citizens but as current stakeholders.

In practice, the municipalities collaborate to create and improve structures for youth participation, such as youth councils, dialogue forums, and inclusive consultation processes. They also develop methods to better integrate young people’s perspectives into policy-making and urban development, ensuring that their needs and ideas are reflected in local governance. Special attention is often given to reaching groups of young people who are typically underrepresented, including those affected by displacement or social exclusion. A key element of the work is peer learning between partner municipalities.

Through network meetings and joint activities, partnerships also share experiences and refine approaches to youth inclusion, supported by training and expert input. Overall, their work contributes to democratic resilience by empowering young people, strengthening trust in public institutions, and embedding inclusive participation practices that can endure over time.

Höör – Kopychyntsi: “Youth Inclusion and Community Development”

The partnership between Höör and Kopychyntsi focuses on strengthening youth engagement in local decision-making as a foundation for resilient local democracy. Both municipalities have identified a common challenge: many young people lack awareness of democratic processes and opportunities for participation, resulting in weak representation of youth interests and an increasing distance between young citizens and local authorities.

The long-term ambition of the partnership is to create more sustainable structures for youth participation. This includes increasing the number of municipal staff dedicated to youth work, strengthening professional competencies in democratic engagement, and significantly expanding youth involvement in political and social life. At the same time, the partnership is closely connected to Ukraine’s broader European integration process.

As Mayor Bogdan Kelichavyi of Kopychyntsi explains:

“It is important to do bottom-up homework. Because we need each other — Ukraine needs European integration for the future and Sweden needs security. On the local level we can achieve sustainable change.”

The cooperation therefore combines local democratic development with broader goals of European integration and societal resilience. A key focus for the Kopychyntsi project group has been learning how local democracy functions in Sweden, particularly how municipalities involve young people in decision-making and how democratic education and human rights are integrated into community life in Höör.

Through exchanges and study visits, the partners have explored practical models for participation and discussed how these approaches can be adapted to the Ukrainian context. Participation in the ICLD Network for Democratic Resilience has had a significant impact on the

partnership.

According to the Ukrainian partners, the network has provided something beyond bilateral cooperation:

“When you work within a network of 30 municipalities from Sweden and Ukraine, you start to see patterns. You realise that the challenges you face in youth participation or institutional development are not unique to your municipality.”

This broader perspective helped the partnership move from simply reactivating a youth council to developing a more systemic understanding of what meaningful youth participation requires, including civic education, institutional mechanisms, and genuine influence on local decisions. The network has also created a sense of accountability and motivation, encouraging municipalities to focus on achieving real results rather than only implementing activities.



Participants in the Kopychyntsi–Höör partnership and their mentor visiting the European Parliament.

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Among the most valuable activities have been study visits and peer-learning sessions. For Kopychyntsi, observing Swedish approaches to youth participation in practice provided concrete inspiration and practical reference points.

However, the real value lay not only in observation, but in the collaborative problem-solving process itself. As the partners describe:

“When you tackle the same challenge from two very different local contexts, a Swedish municipality and a Ukrainian one. It naturally highlights approaches you would never have considered on your own.”

The partnership’s contribution to democratic resilience is closely tied to its emphasis on creating lasting participatory structures for young people. In the Ukrainian context, where war places enormous strain on communities and institutions, the project takes the position that democratic participation is not a luxury to be postponed, but something that becomes even more important during crisis. As the partners explain:

“Our project takes the opposite position: these things matter more during a crisis, not less.”

Through the establishment of a Youth Council, civic education workshops, public spaces for youth engagement, and baseline surveys on participation, the project is helping to build a new generation of active citizens. The aim is to ensure that young people see the local government not as something distant, but as something they can influence and shape themselves.

The partners describe democratic resilience as the ability of a community to keep democratic processes functioning and meaningful even under pressure.

In this sense, the project contributes not only to immediate youth engagement, but also to the long-term development of democratic culture and accountability.

As the partners conclude:

“That is democratic resilience in practice: making sure that when the pressure eases, the democratic muscles are stronger, not weaker.”

Overall, the Höör–Kopychyntsi partnership demonstrates how youth participation, civic education, and international cooperation are essential to reinforcing democratic resilience and the local level. By combining practical learning, institutional development, and trust-based collaboration, the project contributes to building more inclusive, participatory, and future-oriented communities in both Sweden and Ukraine.

Trollhättan – Fastiv: “EU-Integration through Youth Inclusion”

The partnership between Trollhättan and Fastiv under the theme “EU Integration through Youth Inclusion,” focuses on empowering young people as active participants in democratic processes and community development. At its core, the project targets youth in vulnerable contexts—including rural youth in Ukraine and girls with immigrant backgrounds in socio-economically disadvantaged areas of Trollhättan.

Through this focus, the partnership aims to foster inclusive practices, civic engagement, and a shared understanding of Euro-Atlantic integration.

A central component of the collaboration is the joint development of a training curriculum on EU integration, where youth perspectives are actively incorporated. The partnership emphasizes clear communication, adaptability, and the strategic use of interpreters, ensuring that collaboration remains effective despite linguistic and contextual differences. Although still in its early stages, the initiative is already laying out the groundwork for a participatory, youth-centered model that strengthens local democracy, community resilience, and European integration.

Participation in a broader thematic partnership network has been a key driver of development

for the Trollhättan–Fastiv collaboration.

As the partners describe, this has enabled them to move beyond a purely bilateral relationship:

“Participation in the partnership network enabled us to move beyond bilateral cooperation and gain a broader understanding of how different communities address similar challenges.”

The network has provided a space not only for sharing successful practices but also for openly discussing challenges and failures. This has proven particularly valuable:

“This type of exchange allows other participants to anticipate risks, avoid common mistakes, and plan their activities more effectively... significantly improving both project quality and team preparedness.”

For Trollhättan and Fastiv, this engagement has marked a transition toward a more structured and strategic partnership, including joint



Participants in the Fastiv-Trollhättan partnership visiting Brussels in 2024.

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planning, long-term visioning, and the exploration of future collaborations with additional European partners. The partnership has already demonstrated tangible outcomes, such as the joint presentation of the youth-created artwork “Ukraine Together with Europe” to European institutions in Brussels—an initiative that highlighted the partnership’s presence on a European stage.

In terms of learning, study visits and peer learning sessions have been the most impactful formats. These activities have combined theoretical knowledge with real-world experience, allowing participants to engage directly with complex challenges. The Ukrainian partners’ sharing of practical experiences from operating under martial law has been particularly valuable, offering insights into crisis management, governance continuity, and communication under pressure. This has deepened mutual understanding and enabled more concrete discussions on how practices can be adapted across contexts.

The youth-focused components of the project have also played a significant role. Through direct interaction with youth structures and institutions, participants have been able to observe how youth engagement works in practice and compare approaches between Sweden and Ukraine. This has helped identify strengths on both sides and provided a clearer understanding of how European practices can be adapted locally in Fastiv.

The partnership’s contribution to local democratic resilience is evident in its combined focus on participatory tools, institutional capa-

city, and active citizenship. As described by the partners:

“The project contributes to strengthening democratic resilience... by developing participatory tools, enhancing institutional capacity, and fostering a culture of responsible governance.”

The active involvement of the leadership from both municipalities has been a key success factor, strengthening trust and supporting informed decision-making. At the same time, the youth module plays a crucial role in building long-term resilience by encouraging young people to engage in community life and understand their role in democratic processes. This contributes to the development of active, responsible citizens who are willing and able to shape their communities.

The Euro-Atlantic Integration School, a central element of the project, serves as both a learning platform and a space for equal partnership. It allows participants to observe how governance and democratic processes function within an EU member state, while also providing an opportunity for Ukrainian partners to share their own experiences of managing communities under crisis conditions. This exchange is mutually beneficial and highlights the value of reciprocal learning.

Overall, the Trollhättan–Fastiv partnership demonstrates how youth inclusion, trust-based cooperation, and structured peer learning can contribute to both democratic resilience and European integration. By combining practical experience, inclusive approaches, and international collaboration, the project not only supports immediate community needs but also

builds a foundation for long-term democratic development and EU-standard alignment.

Växjö – Kalush: “Youth Participation in Local Governance”

The partnership between Växjö and Kalush focuses on strengthening young people’s engagement in democratic processes and local decision-making. While both municipalities share the ambition of increasing youth participation, they approach the challenge from different angles. In Kalush, many young people lack awareness of their rights and responsibilities. In Växjö, the challenge lies more in creating inclusive participation structures that reach beyond already politically engaged youth.

Together, the partnership aims to develop more accessible and meaningful ways for young people to influence local governance.

At the center of the collaboration is Kalush’s “School of Democracy”, an educational initiative designed to teach young people about democracy through interactive learning. The program combines workshops, assignments, and simulations, including exercises and games on municipal budgeting and political negotiation. Originally developed on a smaller scale, the initiative is now being expanded to reach approximately 320 students through 16 trained teachers. The concept has also evolved to include younger children and scenarios inspired by real governance challenges.



Participants in the partnership Kalush-Växjö

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The School of Democracy has become an important source of inspiration for Växjö, which is currently working to establish its own youth council, partly modeled on Kalush's experience. Political support for this initiative already exists, and a proposal to give a youth representative a permanent voice in Växjö's city council is under consideration. At the same time, both municipalities continue to explore creative ways of engaging young people, including through interactive videos and participatory art projects.

A shared challenge for both partners is reaching groups of young people who are marginalized, displaced, or less engaged in civic life. In Kalush, this includes internally displaced persons (IDPs), who are increasingly being integrated into the School of Democracy. In Växjö, efforts are focused on creating more inclusive participation structures that involve youth from diverse backgrounds and communities.

Participation in the DR Network has been a significant strength for the partnership. According to the partners:

"The network participation has given us a great opportunity to meet our partner city on a more regular basis and work closer together in issues relevant for both cities."

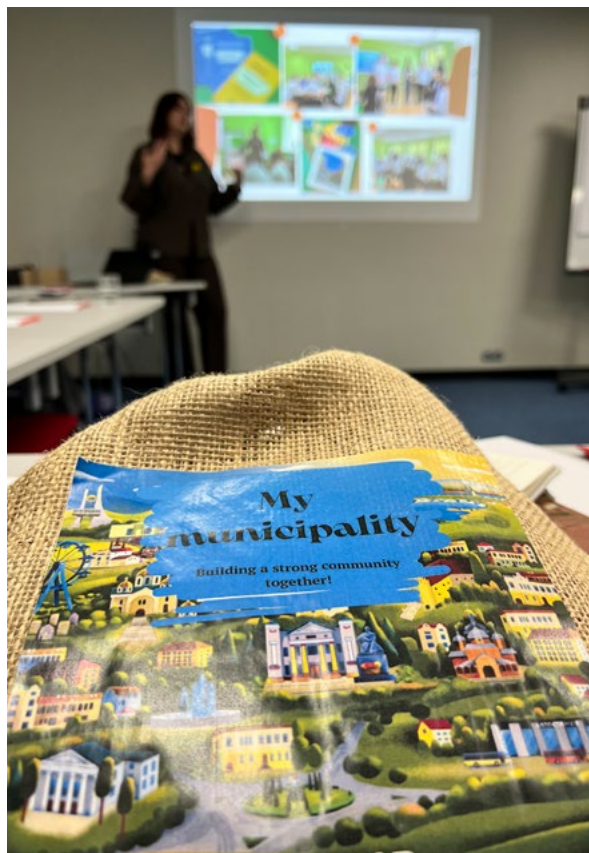
The support and guidance from ICLD have contributed not only to practical project development, but also to a deeper understanding of both the similarities and differences between Swedish and Ukrainian local governance contexts. The network has also enabled learning across partnerships, where municipa-

lities working on related topics can exchange methods, experiences, and solutions.

The partnership's contribution to local democratic resilience is closely tied to its focus on youth participation and democratic education. As the partners explain:

"Our work has contributed to strengthening democratic resilience by encouraging broader reflection on how local democracy functions under pressure, and how municipalities can prepare for crisis while continuing to uphold participation, transparency and trust."

Through the School of Democracy and Växjö's work on youth dialogue and influence, the project strengthens the relationship between young citizens and local government. Young



people gain practical understanding of democratic processes, opportunities to participate, and experience dialogue with decision-makers. In the longer term, this contributes to more inclusive, responsive, and resilient local democracies, capable of functioning both in stable conditions and during times of crisis.

Overall, the Växjö–Kalush partnership demonstrates how youth participation can serve as a foundation for democratic resilience. By combining educational initiatives, institutional development, and international peer learning, the project supports both immediate civic engagement and the long-term development of democratic culture and trust between citizens and local authorities.

Falun – Kolomyia: “Youth, Education and Entrepreneurship”

The partnership between Falun and Kolomyia focuses on youth engagement, entrepreneurship, and inclusive education as tools for

strengthening local democratic resilience and economic participation. Through educational initiatives, teacher training, and international exchange, the project aims to equip young people with practical skills, confidence, and opportunities to actively shape their futures.

Already, around 90 students have participated in project-related educational activities, alongside a growing number of teachers involved in training and peer-learning processes. In Falun, the work is linked to upcoming curriculum reforms and efforts to strengthen entrepreneurship education in schools. In Kolomyia, the partnership has drawn inspiration from Falun’s experiences with job fairs and the Young Enterprise (UF) model, adapting these approaches to the local context.

A central theme throughout the partnership is inclusion. The mayor of Kolomyia emphasized how positively the project has been received locally, particularly because of its focus on creating opportunities for groups often excluded



The mayors of Falun and Kolomyia signed a sister city agreement.

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from entrepreneurship initiatives:

“We are working to ensure that people with disabilities have the opportunity to start and run their own businesses – it’s good for them and good for the municipality.”

The project has also identified financial literacy and entrepreneurial training as important tools for strengthening youth participation and local resilience. As one participant reflected:

“We realized that our focus should be training in financial management for our citizens. We succeeded in bringing together a very diverse group of youth and politicians.”

This broad engagement has already produced concrete results. Young participants in Kolomyia have created nine youth companies, many of which continue to participate in courses and further develop their skills. The

businesses demonstrate both creativity and environmental awareness, ranging from dried fruit production and water filtration systems to plastic recycling and food production for local shops.

An especially successful initiative has been the NextGen Innovation Hack, where young participants competed with entrepreneurial ideas. The experience of recognition and achievement proved highly motivating:

“When you give prizes and they taste how victory feels, they get hungry for more and participate again.”

The partnership also highlights the importance of teacher development and peer learning. Teachers who initially participated in entrepreneurship training became ambassadors within their own schools, inspiring colleagues to enga-



Kolomyia team visiting Falun.

ge. This eventually led to the development of a “teachers for teachers” training model, where educators support each other in spreading methods and approaches across schools.

Another important aspect has been the focus on gender equality in education and entrepreneurship. Falun identified that fewer girls than boys were participating in financial literacy and entrepreneurship programmes. In response, the municipality recruited female role models from traditionally male-dominated sectors such as construction and electrical engineering to meet students and speak about their professional experiences. The initiative was based on research showing that girls are particularly influenced by role models of their own gender. This approach has helped challenge stereotypes and encourage broader participation among young women.

The project has also worked actively with inclusion of migrants, including outreach activities conducted together with the organization New Entrepreneur Centre. These efforts aim to ensure that entrepreneurship opportunities are accessible to a wider range of young people from different backgrounds. Further, Falun and Kolomyia have engaged in frequent online exchanges, creating strong connections and opportunities for everyday communication. As one participant noted:

“It’s great to see how the exchange between Falun Gymnasium and Kolomyia is developing and how they speak with each other on an everyday basis. You can really see their English improving.”

Beyond language skills, these exchanges contribute to intercultural understanding, confidence-building, and broader perspectives on democracy, education, and participation. The partnership’s contribution to democratic resilience lies in its ability to connect entre-

preneurship, inclusion, and participation. By creating opportunities for young people to develop ideas, collaborate across borders, and engage in practical problem-solving, the project strengthens both individual agency and community capacity. It also builds stronger links between schools, municipalities, businesses, and civil society.

Looking ahead, Falun is exploring the possibility of establishing a long-term administrative function dedicated to maintaining and developing the partnership with Kolomyia. This reflects the ambition to move from a project-based collaboration toward a more sustainable and institutionalized form of international cooperation.

Overall, the Falun–Kolomyia partnership demonstrates how entrepreneurship education, inclusive participation, and international exchange can contribute to stronger local democracies and more resilient communities. By empowering young people with practical skills, confidence, and networks, the project helps create a new generation of active citizens and future community leaders.

Berg – Krolevets: “Youth Inclusion”

The partnership between Berg Municipality and Krolevets was established through an ICLD matchmaking process during Almedalsveckan in Visby in June 2025. Since that first meeting, the municipalities have held bilateral meetings involving senior political leadership and ICLD representatives, laying the foundation for a long-term collaboration focused on rural development. Both municipalities face similar structural challenges as rural communities, including population decline, limited opportunities for young people, and pressure on local services. For Krolevets, these challenges

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are further intensified by the war and its impact on local communities and institutions.

Against this background, the partnership seeks to strengthen local democracy, inclusion, preparedness, and youth engagement, while creating opportunities for mutual learning and sustainable community development.

The partnership itself is a direct result of the opportunities created through the wider network. As representatives from Krolevets explained:

“This first meeting was at the ICLD matchmaking event, so we’d like to thank ICLD, because if it wasn’t arranged, we would not have had this partnership today.”

The initial meeting quickly developed into a closer collaboration through regular online exchanges between mayors, municipal repre-

sentatives, and project teams. According to the partners:

“This meeting, followed by online meetings between our mayors and other members of our municipalities, helped us establish good contact and good relationships.”

Although the project is still in an early phase, the partnership has already begun identifying shared priorities and practical areas for cooperation. One central theme is youth empowerment, with both municipalities recognizing the importance of involving young people in shaping the future of their communities. Entrepreneurship, rural development, and preparedness are also key focus areas.

Participation in the Democratic Resilience Network has been particularly valuable in helping the partners better understand each other’s local realities and identify opportunities for future collaboration. Swedish participants



described the exchanges as highly meaningful and educational:

“For us, as Swedish participants, this was a really interesting and eye-opening experience. We also had a lot of time to talk about our future partnership.”

The opportunity to discuss common challenges and future ambitions in depth helped create momentum for further project development. As another participant reflected:

“We consciously understood a lot of new things and took the time to discuss our next projects.”

One concrete idea emerging from the collaboration is the development of an inclusive sports and activity area in Krolevets, aimed at both veterans and young people. The initiative combines physical wellbeing, inclusion, and community-building with broader democratic goals of participation and social cohesion. As the Ukrainian partners explained:

“Our idea for this funding was to create an inclusive sports area. We wanted to equip that area for veterans and youth interested in training and powerlifting.”

This reflects the partnership’s broader approach, where local development initiatives are closely connected to resilience, inclusion, and democratic participation. The cooperation also contributes to democratic resilience at the local level by strengthening relationships between municipalities, increasing institutional learning, and creating practical opportunities for youth participation and community engagement. According to the partners:

“These are the areas of our cooperation: youth empowerment, entrepreneurship, business support, rural development, and learning from each other’s resilience and preparedness experiences.”

An important aspect of the partnership is the mutual exchange of experiences around preparedness and resilience. While Berg contributes perspectives on rural development, democratic participation, and local governance in a stable context, Krolevets brings valuable knowledge about functioning and maintaining community resilience under wartime conditions. This creates a two-way learning process where both municipalities gain new perspectives and tools.

Overall, the Berg–Krolevets partnership demonstrates how international municipal cooperation can create new opportunities for rural communities facing shared challenges. By combining youth engagement, preparedness, accessibility, the project contributes to building stronger, more inclusive, and more resilient local communities in both Sweden and Ukraine.



Jenny Nylund, Head of Business Development and Technical Services, Berg and Viacheslav Zhovttia, Deputy Mayor, Krolevets, meeting at Almedalsveckan in Visby, Sweden, 2025.

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Piteå-Lutsk: “Increasing Young People’s Impact”

The partnership between Piteå and Lutsk focuses on strengthening youth participation in local democracy and increasing young people’s engagement in political and decision-making processes. Both municipalities identified a shared challenge: many young people are interested in societal issues, but often lack the knowledge, structures, and opportunities needed to influence local governance effectively.

As one project representative explained:

“Young people are interested, but they need to understand how to make an impact, and for that they need clear structures.”

To address this, the partnership is developing a Youth Dialogue Handbook aimed at public

facilitators, teachers, and mentors working with democratic participation and youth engagement. The handbook is being co-developed by both municipalities and is intended to become a practical and long-term tool used regularly in schools and local governance contexts.

The project combines peer learning, workshops, and study visits to strengthen local capacities and exchange practical methods for youth inclusion. Participants have worked on topics such as survey techniques, democratic dialogue, civic participation, and facilitation methods. Through partner visits, representatives from both municipalities have had the opportunity to observe how youth participation structures function in practice. During a visit to Piteå, for example, representatives from Lutsk visited a youth cultural centre and learned how local authorities create spaces where



Lutsk team visiting Piteå.

young people can meet, organize, and engage in community life.

An important aspect of the partnership is the use of sports and culture as bridges for participation and inclusion. Recognizing that democratic engagement often begins through informal community activities rather than formal political channels. This approach has helped broaden participation and reach young people with different backgrounds and interests. The project has also generated important local knowledge through direct youth consultation. A survey involving 600 young people was conducted and later presented to a broad audience of stakeholders. The results highlighted key concerns among youth, including mental health, future anxiety, economic insecurity, safety, and the need to feel genuinely heard by decision-makers. These findings are now helping shape local youth policies and participation structures.

Concrete outcomes of the partnership already include the development of a proposal for a youth council in Piteå, internship opportunities within municipal government, support for volunteer initiatives, and the creation of more permanent structures for youth policy development in Lutsik. The project also includes ongoing online training, collaboration with researchers from Luleå University of Technology, and training sessions for teachers and youth leaders. Participation in the Democratic Resilience Network has played a major role in the partnership's development. According to the partners:

"Participation in the Democratic Resilience Network has initiated cooperation between the Piteå and Lutsik municipalities as well as brought to implementation of the joint youth participation project."

The network has provided opportunities for

municipalities facing similar democratic challenges to exchange experiences and learn from one another through conferences, workshops, and study visits. Events in Sarajevo, Brussels, Umeå, and Tallinn not only strengthened professional connections but also deepened participants' understanding of EU democratic standards, transparency, participatory governance, and inclusion.

The partnership's contribution to democratic resilience lies in its focus on creating meaningful opportunities for young people to become active participants in local democracy. As the partners explain:

"Through the project implemented together with the Municipality of Piteå, we are encouraging young people to move from being passive observers to becoming active participants in democratic processes."

Another important contribution is the strengthening of cooperation between local government, schools, youth councils, and civil society organizations. Through training and the integration of democratic practices into both education and local governance, the project contributes to building a more informed, engaged, and resilient community, better prepared to respond to current and future challenges.

Gotland-Berislav: "Strong Democratic Institutions"

The partnership between Gotland and Berislav, under the theme "Strong Democratic Institutions," is rooted in deep historical and cultural ties. Around 10% of Gotland's population has Ukrainian heritage, creating a strong foundation for cooperation and solidarity. Building on this historic connection, the partnership aims to strengthen democratic resilience, inclusive governance, and long-term societal development, despite the municipalities facing very

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different local realities. Both municipalities struggle with demographic challenges, though in contrasting forms. In Gotland, many young people leave the island for education and do not return, creating concerns about long-term community sustainability. In Berislav, the situation is far more dramatic. Located near the frontline of the war in Ukraine, only around 5% of the municipality's original population remains. Despite these circumstances, both municipalities are united around the shared vision of "Growing Together for a Resilient Future."

A central part of the partnership is youth engagement and community participation. During a student exchange visit, the partners developed a survey to gather perspectives from remaining residents, displaced youth, and older citizens in Berislav. The findings are now being used to inform reconstruction planning and future community development. The methodology

will also be adapted in Gotland, particularly in communities facing similar challenges related to inclusion and youth retention, such as the Roma community. In this way, the partnership demonstrates how local democratic tools can be adapted and transferred across different contexts. The partnership is characterized by a broad and inclusive approach, involving not only municipalities but also civil society organizations and local communities. NGOs contribute expertise in cultural heritage, participation, and inclusion, helping to ensure that reconstruction efforts are socially sustainable and participatory. A Memorandum of Understanding signed between Berislav and Visby during Almedalsveckan further underlines the partnership's long-term commitment.

Despite operating under wartime conditions, the partnership has already achieved several concrete results. These include donation-driven emergency vehicles, exchange visits for child-



Participants in the partnership Berislav-Gotland

ren, knowledge-sharing activities, and the development of more sustainable communication systems that do not depend on individual staff members. One particularly important achievement has been the successful implementation of a comprehensive community survey during wartime, demonstrating both resilience and commitment to democratic participation.

The DR network provided opportunities not only for bilateral cooperation, but also for exchange with many other Swedish and Ukrainian municipalities facing similar democratic challenges. According to the partners, this broader exchange created a valuable environment for learning, inspiration, and practical problem-solving. The partners particularly appreciated the comprehensive approach of the network, combining online meetings, seminars, peer-learning, and in-person study visits.

As one representative described:

“The monthly meetings... helped us understand each time what stage everyone was at... The in-person meetings were also important... It worked very well as a whole, as a comprehensive approach.”

In Berislav, traditional forms of participation such as public hearings became difficult or impossible due to displacement and insecurity. Instead, the municipality developed new approaches using digital tools such as Google surveys, online communication, and Zoom meetings to ensure residents could still participate in planning and decision-making.

As the partners reflected:

“We learned how to hear everyone’s voice... We found a new way... to directly involve all residents in implementation and in the planning process.”

At the same time, the exchange has also provided learning opportunities for Gotland. Because of its island geography and discussions around preparedness and resilience, Swedish partners have drawn inspiration from Berislav’s experiences of functioning during crisis conditions, including coping with electricity outages, communication disruptions, and weakened infrastructure. Beyond practical cooperation, the partnership is ultimately about building trust, solidarity, and long-term relationships.

Overall, the Gotland–Berislav partnership demonstrates how historical ties, youth participation, institutional strengthening, and international cooperation can support democratic resilience even under the most difficult circumstances. By combining practical support with inclusive governance and long-term relationship-building, the project contributes to more sustainable, participatory, and resilient communities.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Karlskrona-Chortkiv, Lidingö-Slavuta and Karlskoga-Shepetivka all work with inclusive education on different levels. By strengthening local education systems to ensure equal access, participation, and quality for all learners, especially in challenging and crisis-affected contexts.

In practice, municipalities collaborate to develop more inclusive policies, improve teaching methods, and create supportive learning environments where all students can participate fully. This often includes working with teacher training, student participation, and closer cooperation between schools, local authorities, and communities.

Overall, the partnerships use inclusive education as a way to strengthen democratic resilience by promoting equal opportunities, fostering participation, and building trust in public institutions from an early age.

Karlskrona – Chortkiv: “Silver Age University”

The partnership between Karlskrona and Chortkiv builds on a long-standing collaboration connected to Litorina Folk High School and has gradually evolved into a broader initiative focused on adult education, social inclusion, and democratic participation. The project particularly targets older citizens, a group heavily affected by the consequences of war in Ukraine and demonstrates how lifelong learning can contribute to both individual well-being and stronger local communities.

What initially began as a relatively simple initiative centered around Nordic walking and health

activities has developed into a wider movement promoting inclusion, participation, and active citizenship among older adults.

In Chortkiv, the project has already had tangible local effects by improving health, strengthening social cohesion, and creating new opportunities for participation among elderly residents. As the mayor of Chortkiv emphasized, the partnership delivers “real results - not just words on paper.”



The partnership Chortkiv-Karlskrona

Several important aspects of organizational readiness and democratic governance are addressed through partnership. Political commitment is strong, with local leaders in Chortkiv actively involved in the work. Citizen participation is emphasized through activities that are co-designed together with local communities, and the project has made deliberate efforts to include vulnerable and marginalized groups, including war veterans, older adults, and people with disabilities.

Despite operating under difficult wartime conditions, the partnership is described by both municipalities as highly mutual and genuinely beneficial for all involved. There are also ambitions to further expand cooperation in areas such as public health together with Poltava, while Karlskrona is exploring ways to strengthen the European dimension of the work through plans for a future local EU office. Participation in the Democratic Resilience Network has played an important role in strengthening the collaboration.

According to the partners:

“Being part of a thematic network has created valuable opportunities for peer learning, inspiration and long-term collaboration.”

Through exchanges with municipalities working on similar challenges, the partnership has gained practical ideas, new perspectives, and a deeper understanding of how democratic resilience can be strengthened at the local level. The network has also provided continuity and encouragement during difficult periods, while strengthening both professional cooperation and personal relationships between partners.

Study visits, particularly to municipalities such as Umeå, provided concrete examples of local governance, citizen dialogue, and community engagement in practice. These experiences inspired new ideas for local implementation and demonstrated how democratic participation can be integrated into everyday municipal work.



Silver Age University participants in Chortkiv

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The partnership's contribution to democratic resilience is strongly connected to its focus on trust-building and long-term relationships.

Through knowledge exchange and joint activities, the project has strengthened dialogue between municipalities, civil servants, and local communities. It has also created opportunities for participation, mutual learning, and greater understanding between people living in very different local realities. In times of uncertainty and crisis, the partnership highlights the importance of solidarity and human connection as part of democratic resilience. As the partners reflected:

“Local democracy is built not only through structures and policies, but also through solidarity, cooperation and human connections.”

Overall, the Karlskrona–Chortkiv partnership demonstrates how lifelong learning, inclusion, and community engagement can strengthen democratic resilience even in difficult circumstances.

Lidingö – Slavuta: “Developing Critical Thinking”

The partnership between Lidingö and Slavuta is unique within the network for its focus on resilient education as a foundation for democratic resilience. In the context of war, disinformation, and broader societal challenges, collaboration emphasizes critical thinking, media literacy, and inclusive education as essential tools for strengthening democracy, social cohesion, and active citizenship. At the heart of the project is a shared commitment to youth

participation and democratic education. In Lidingö, students aged 15–18 engage with critical thinking through social science education, focusing on topics such as countering propaganda, information influence, and democratic values. In Slavuta, the project has reached an even broader scale, with thousands of students participating in activities related to cybersecurity, media literacy, and critical thinking.

A major initiative included a fall school programme specifically dedicated to identifying propaganda and strengthening students' media awareness. The partnership has also placed strong emphasis on capacity-building among teachers and educators. Teachers and school leaders from both municipalities have participated in training on democratic education, addressing violence, and critically examining historical narratives, including Soviet propaganda. These activities aim to equip educators with practical tools to help young people navigate increasingly complex information environments. One of the project's major achievements is the development of a handbook on resilient education and critical thinking, intended as a long-term educational resource. The handbook reflects the partnership's broader vision of strengthening democracy through education.

Another participant summarized the project's core philosophy by explaining:

“The topic is clear, empowering democracy through critical thinking... What we are doing is building democratic resilience.”

Beyond individual activities, the partnership seeks to create lasting structural impact. This includes improving channels for youth partici-

pation in governance, strengthening participatory school governance models, and creating platforms for community dialogue. Public outreach through forums such as the UN Association in Sweden and Almedalen Week has further highlighted the project's broader societal relevance.

The network has provided a platform for peer exchange, reflection, and practical collaboration, helping the partnership move from isolated activities toward a more strategic and long-term approach. Peer-learning sessions, workshops, and study visits have been especially valuable, creating opportunities to discuss sensitive topics related to democracy, war, resilience, and education while also building trust between partners. The project's contribution to local democratic resilience is closely connected to its educational focus. As the partners says:

"This partnership demonstrates that democratic resilience is being built by fostering critical thinking and active citizenship."

By strengthening critical thinking, media literacy, and youth participation, the project helps young people become more informed and active citizens capable of engaging constructively in democratic processes. The project has also strengthened institutional cooperation and trust between schools, municipalities, and local communities. An important success factor has been the partnership's ability to quickly translate ideas into practice. The impact of this work is visible not only at the institutional level, but also on a personal level. Teachers and parents have described significant positive effects on students' confidence and engagement. The Lidingö-team shared:

"I have heard parents say you have done something huge for my kid."

The partnership has also inspired broader educational development within Slavuta. According to the partners:

"There is a new Ukrainian school whose main profile is critical thinking thanks to the partnership with Lidingö."



Students from Slavuta at a democracy competition

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Youth participation has become increasingly integrated into local democratic processes. In Slavuta, students are encouraged to experience leadership roles directly through activities where they simulate being deputy mayors or city leaders for a day.

These exercises help young people understand the complexity and responsibility involved in governance. Students are now also participating in youth budgeting processes, giving them practical insight into how public resources are prioritized and allocated.

Ultimately, the partnership views democratic resilience as something deeper than physical reconstruction alone. As one participant reflected:

“Why does this partnership matter now? It’s not about building roads or buildings; it’s about building the foundation of democracy.”

Overall, the Lidingö–Slavuta partnership demonstrates how education, critical thinking, and active citizenship strengthen democratic resilience even during crisis and war.

Karlskoga – Shepetivka: “Equitable Waste Management”

The partnership between Karlskoga and Shepetivka focuses on equitable waste management and recycling as a foundation for sustainable and resilient local development. Although this is the municipalities’ first partnership within the ICLD framework, the collaboration builds on an earlier twinning agreement established in 2023, reflecting a shared commitment to long-term cooperation. The partnership’s long-term ambition is to

increase public awareness of waste management, recycling, and environmental responsibility in both communities. In the shorter term, the partners are working together to develop a coherent and sustainable waste management strategy, adapted to local needs and conditions. This includes exchanging experiences on environmental governance, municipal services, crisis preparedness, and citizen engagement.

Participation in the ICLD thematic network has played an important role in shaping and strengthening the partnership. As the partners explain:

“Participation in a network is, first and foremost, about the speed and quality of solutions. You don’t start from scratch; instead, you build on the experience of other communities that have already faced similar challenges.”

For Karlskoga and Shepetivka, the network marked a transition from initial exchange visits relationship-building to more structured and strategic cooperation. After joining the ICLD



The mayors of Shepetivka and Karlskoga: Vitalii Buzyl and Tony Ring.

network in 2025, the partnership gained a clearer framework for planning and implementation, helping the partners identify waste management as a shared thematic focus. One of the most valuable aspects of the cooperation has been the opportunity for practical peer learning. Study visits and direct exchanges between municipal professionals have enabled participants to observe how solutions function in reality, including both successes and limitations. During a working visit to Karlskoga in January 2026, representatives from Shepetivka were able to study the municipality's waste management system, environmental approaches, and municipal services in practice.

The visit also included broader exchanges on governance, social services, preschool education, civil protection, and environmental management, helping participants identify approaches that could be adapted to the Ukrainian context. The partnership's contribution to democratic resilience is closely connected to its focus on transparent governance, institutional strengthening, and public trust. As the partners describe:

“For us, democratic resilience is not an abstract concept but a daily management practice. It is about transparent decisions, clear processes, and people's engagement.”

Shepetivka is strengthening its institutional capacity through the partnership, by introducing more systematic approaches to governance and improving the quality of municipal services. Waste management projects are viewed not only as infrastructure improvements but also as opportunities to build a new culture of interaction between local authorities, municipal services, and residents.

This approach is particularly important in wartime conditions, where reliable services and transparent communication are essential for maintaining public trust. The partners emphasize that democratic values are expressed not only through formal procedures, but through a community's ability to preserve responsibility, openness, and cooperation even during crisis. Strong institutions, practical collaboration, and citizen engagement are therefore seen as key elements in building resilient and democratic local communities.



Participants of the partnership Karlskoga-Shepetivka

CONCLUDING WORDS

One key takeaway from following these partnerships is the value of working through a network-based approach to international cooperation. The partnerships between municipalities were not isolated exchanges, but part of a broader network that enabled continuous dialogue, shared reflection, and collective learning across different local contexts.

This approach created opportunities not only to exchange ideas, but also to build lasting relationships and strengthen institutional capacity over time. An important lesson learned is that mutual learning becomes significantly stronger and more effective when municipalities engage as equal partners within a long-term network.

Rather than focusing on one-directional transfer of knowledge, the cooperation created spaces where all participants could contribute with experiences, challenges, and solutions. Swedish municipalities often shared approaches related to local democracy, participation, and community development, while Ukrainian municipalities contributed with valuable perspectives on resilience, adaptability, and maintaining local governance under crisis conditions. The diversity of experiences within the network enriched the learning process for everyone involved.

The ICLD network approach also demonstrated the importance of continuity and trust-building. Sustainable cooperation cannot be achieved through short-term projects alone. Repeated exchanges, study visits, and joint activities allowed municipalities to develop a deeper understanding of each other's realities and priorities, creating stronger foundations for

future collaboration.

Another important lesson is that international municipal networks create value beyond individual projects or activities. Through the broader network, municipalities gained access to new perspectives, peer support, and inspiration from other local contexts facing similar challenges. This strengthened not only specific initiatives, but also the municipalities' broader capacity for innovation, democratic development, and local problem-solving.

A combined analysis of all the partnerships further highlights how the network structure contributed to democratic resilience and solidarity. In times of uncertainty and polarization, international cooperation at the local level helps reinforce shared democratic values, social cohesion, and a sense of common purpose. The partnerships demonstrated that municipalities play an important role as actors of international solidarity while simultaneously learning from one another in practical and meaningful ways.

A particularly important dimension of the network's success has been the structured approach to capacity-building and learning that has underpinned the entire programme. Through both in-person network meetings and digital formats, tailored training sessions, lectures, and study visits were systematically integrated into the work.

These educational efforts were not incidental additions, but part of carefully designed learning plans aligned with the thematic priorities

of the participating municipalities. The consistent feedback from municipalities and external participants reflects how well these activities address real needs. The choice of topics, the quality of lecturers and researchers, and the overall structure of the learning programme were repeatedly highlighted as key strengths. The combination of theoretical knowledge and practical application helped participating municipalities strengthen their capacity to advance their projects and achieve concrete results.

An equally important structural element of the network has been the regular monthly coordination meetings held with coordinators, project managers, and mentors. With 30 municipalities involved, maintaining coherence, shared direction, and a genuine sense of community required sustained effort. These meetings created recurring spaces for information-sharing, joint problem-solving, and mutual support, enabling participants to address challenges early, exchange experiences, and remain aligned throughout the programme.

The regular mentor meetings provided an additional layer of guidance and continuity, ensuring that experience and expertise remained closely connected to the network's ongoing work. Together, these structures fostered a strong sense of shared ownership and commitment among participants.

Ultimately, the experiences of these partnerships underline that the greatest strength of the programme lies not only in the individual activities, but in the creation of a durable international network built on trust, reciprocity, and shared learning.

The combination of long lasting relationships, continuous dialogue, structured learning, and science-based support has enabled the network to deliver efficient and lasting impact. These achievements provide a strong foundation for continued cooperation and demonstrate how long-term municipal networks can contribute to more resilient, inclusive, and democratic communities across borders.



SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED RESEARCH IN THE NETWORK FOR DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

This is a compilation of research on the nexus between local democracy and resilience, compiled by Yevheniia Vorobiova, based on research conducted by the Kyiv School of Economics and Stockholm University with funding from ICLD.

In the research that has been conducted within the framework of the network for democratic resilience one common main theme emerges: communities become more resilient when local authorities, civil society, residents, businesses, humanitarian actors, and vulnerable groups are able to communicate, cooperate, hold each other accountable, and solve problems together. In other words: a well functioning local democracy is a key component of municipal crisis preparedness and resilience. Most crises require quick action and short chains of decision making. The democratic resilience research in collaboration with the Kyiv School of Economics has shown that quick crises response and upholding democratic principles are not mutual exclusive, but reinforcing each other. Taken together, the research on local democracy and resilience, anti-corruption political will, and trust in humanitarian action presents Ukraine as a case where decentralisation, local participation, transparency, and collaborative governance have become essential tools for survival and adaptation under extreme pressure.

1. Local democracy as a foundation for societal resilience

ICLD Research Report Local Democracy and Resilience in Ukraine: Learning from Communities' Crisis Response in War on local democracy and resilience in Ukraine show that local self-governments have been central to Ukraine's wartime response. During Russia's full-sca-

le invasion, municipalities continued providing basic services, supporting internally displaced persons, repairing infrastructure, maintaining communication with residents, organising emergency responses, and helping communities adapt to prolonged crisis conditions. In other words, well-functioning local democracy is not separate from municipal crisis preparedness; it is one of its core components. While national coordination is essential in wartime, the Ukrainian case shows that decentralised local governments can respond quickly and contextually to local needs. Most crises require quick action and short chains of decision-making. However, the democratic resilience research conducted in collaboration with the Kyiv School of Economics shows that rapid crisis response and democratic principles are not mutually exclusive. Local authorities understand local vulnerabilities, social networks, infrastructure gaps, and available resources. This makes them well placed to organise practical solutions in rapidly changing conditions.

The report finds that local democracy mechanisms — transparency, citizen participation, accountability, and equity — are not abstract democratic values detached from crisis response. They have practical crisis-management functions. Public engagement helps municipalities mobilise resources, gather information, coordinate volunteers and businesses, support IDPs, and maintain legitimacy. Communities that involve a broader range of stakeholders

through dialogue and partnership tend to be somewhat better prepared for war-related challenges.⁶ A key lesson is that democratic practices developed before a crisis can be adapted during a crisis. Pre-existing habits of public consultation, participatory governance, open communication, and collaboration helped Ukrainian local governments respond more effectively after 2022. In this sense, democratic resilience is cumulative: local democracy built in ordinary times becomes a resource in extraordinary times.

2. Collaborative governance as crisis infrastructure

A major theme across Keudel, Darkovich, Hatsko and Huss's research on local democracy and resilience in Ukraine is collaborative governance. In the resilience report, local self-governments are presented not simply as service providers but as coordinators of collective action. Citizens, businesses, civil society organisations, IDPs, volunteers, experts, and humanitarian actors become partners in solving urgent problems. This is especially visible in responses to internal displacement. According to Keudel, Darkovich, Hatsko and Huss, IDP integration became one of the main areas where municipalities engaged stakeholders. IDP integration became one of the main areas where municipalities engaged stakeholders. Local authorities used public engagement to understand IDP needs, coordinate assistance, identify housing and employment opportunities, and reduce social tensions. In some communities, displaced people and relocated businesses were not treated only as vulnerable groups, but also as contributors to local development and recovery. The research report also highlights the importance of physical and discursive community spaces. Humanitarian hubs, IDP councils, youth centres, volunteer hubs, open civic spaces, and support centres help mobilise social capital and make cooperation possible. These spaces create opportunities for people

to meet, exchange information, identify needs, and co-produce solutions. They are therefore part of democratic resilience infrastructure, not merely service points. However, collaboration is difficult under wartime conditions. Local authorities face exhaustion, staff shortages, financial constraints, politicisation, low citizen participation, security risks, and emotional stress caused by rumours and uncertainty. Public engagement can also create unintended consequences, including overload of officials, conflict between groups, or disruption of long-term planning. ICLD's work therefore shows that participation needs careful design, facilitation, inclusion, and resources to contribute positively to resilience.

3. Communication as the basis of political will

The ICLD Research Report Political Will for Anti-Corruption Reform: Communicative Pathways to Collective Action in Ukraine on anti-corruption reform develops a closely related argument: political will is not simply something leaders either possess or lack. It can be built through communication among key stakeholders. In the report on political will for anti-corruption reform, Keudel, Grimes and Huss examine six Ukrainian cities — Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Poltava, Vinnytsia, and Zhytomyr — where local authorities demonstrated sustained anti-corruption effort between 2014 and 2021. The report defines anti-corruption political will as mutually trusted commitments among key actors to reduce corruption, combined with a shared understanding of the problem and agreement on workable solutions. This definition is important because corruption is treated as a collective action problem. In corrupt systems, many actors may publicly support reform while privately doubting that others will change their behaviour. Reform requires a shared belief that others are also genuinely committed. The key finding is that communication is what turns anti-corruption

tion reform from an abstract commitment into collective action: it helps stakeholders define shared benefits, recognise each other's commitments, identify concrete corruption risks, negotiate workable solutions, and sustain reform through continued persuasion and accountability. This work shows that democratic resilience depends not only on formal institutions but also on communicative capacity: the ability to talk across sectors, define common goals, manage disagreement, and maintain accountability over time

4. Trust as a condition and outcome of democratic resilience

The master's thesis by Eliza Kravchenko, *Trust in Humanitarian Action in Ukraine: Beneficiaries' Trust in Humanitarian Actors* on trust in humanitarian action adds another layer to ICLD's democratic resilience agenda by showing how trust operates in crisis-affected communities. It examines how Ukrainians trust humanitarian actors, why trust is strengthened or weakened, and what organisations can do to sustain it. The study uses a multilevel framework of generalised, institutional, and relational trust.

The findings show that Ukrainians express high support for humanitarianism as an ideal: 84.4% of surveyed respondents said humanitarians should be trusted. Yet this generalised trust becomes more selective when specific actors are named. International NGOs receive the highest levels of trust, national NGOs occupy a middle position, while local NGOs and governmental actors receive more neutral or fragmented ratings. This pattern matters for democratic resilience because it shows that trust is not unconditional. People may believe in humanitarian values while remaining cautious toward specific organisations, procedures, or frontline encounters. Trust is built or lost through transparency, fairness, respectful treatment, accessible communication, and visible accountability. Transparency is the

strongest trust-building factor in the humanitarian trust study. Respondents emphasised the need for clear reporting on funding, resources, eligibility criteria, programme intentions, and complaints mechanisms. Distrust was driven by corruption, embezzlement, fraud, broken promises, lack of reporting, opaque processes, and politicisation of aid. The study also highlights relational trust. People's experiences with frontline workers, recommendations from family and friends, and the behaviour of local intermediaries strongly influence perceptions. A single negative experience can damage trust not only in one organisation but in the humanitarian sector more broadly, because many beneficiaries do not clearly distinguish between different aid providers.

5. Transparency and accountability as shared themes

Across all three main studies summarised above transparency appears as a central democratic resilience mechanism. In the humanitarian trust study, transparency is the most important factor shaping trust in aid providers. It reassures beneficiaries that aid is not being misused, politicised, or distributed unfairly.

In the local resilience report, transparency supports crisis response by helping municipalities inform residents, coordinate action, reduce uncertainty, and maintain legitimacy under martial law. In the anti-corruption research by Keudel, Grimes and Huss, transparency is both a policy goal and a tool for building political will. Open data, public auctions, transparent council procedures, and corruption risk assessments reduce discretion and create opportunities for public oversight. The common lesson is that transparency is not only about publishing information. It is about making decisions understandable, traceable, and contestable. It allows citizens and stakeholders to see how resources are used, why decisions are made, and how authorities can be held accountable. In crisis settings, this becomes even more important be-

cause uncertainty, scarcity, and fear can quickly generate rumours, mistrust, and perceptions of unfairness.

6. The importance of facilitation and intermediary actors

Another cross-cutting finding is the importance of facilitators and intermediaries. In the anti-corruption research, facilitators helped structure communication, organise meetings, document ideas, translate technical issues, and keep reforms on the agenda. They could be integrity units, anti-corruption advisors, urban development agencies, civil society actors, university experts, or donor-supported consultants 16. In the local resilience report, facilitators appear through community spaces, IDP councils, NGOs, local associations, and stakeholder platforms that enable cooperation between local government and residents. In the humanitarian trust study, intermediary practitioners play a crucial role because they observe beneficiary behaviour, mediate between organisations and communities, explain procedures, and help maintain trust at distribution points and municipal offices. This suggests that democratic resilience depends heavily on actors who can bridge institutions and communities. These intermediaries translate between different forms of knowledge: technical, administrative, local, emotional, and experiential. They help prevent democratic processes from becoming purely formal or symbolic.

7. Digital tools: resilience resource and vulnerability

Keudel, Darkovich, Hatsko and Huss's research report on local democracy and resilience in Ukraine shows that digital technologies are central to Ukraine's democratic resilience. Local self-governments rely on social media, websites, Viber and Telegram channels, chatbots, hotlines, databases, and digital platforms

to communicate with residents, manage services, and coordinate emergency response 19. At the same time, digitalisation creates vulnerabilities. The resilience report identifies serious gaps in data backups, IT vulnerability testing, and protection of virtual infrastructure. These weaknesses are especially concerning because Ukraine's local governance and crisis communication rely heavily on digital systems. Digital tools can also deepen exclusion if elderly, rural, poor, or digitally disconnected residents cannot access information or services.

The democratic resilience lesson is therefore twofold: digital tools can strengthen local democracy and crisis response, but they must be combined with traditional communication methods and stronger cyber-resilience.

8. Decentralisation, autonomy, and vertical coordination

Keudel, Darkovich, Hatsko and Huss's ICLD research report Local Democracy and Resilience in Ukraine presents decentralisation as a major source of Ukraine's resilience, but also highlights the need for effective vertical coordination. Local governments can respond flexibly and contextually, but they still depend on national frameworks, funding, legal clarity, and coordination with regional and district military administrations. The same research report finds that many LSGs consider information exchange with regional and district military administrations sufficient, but compared with 2022, more municipalities report weaker coordination and less influence over central government decisions 20. This points to a tension between wartime centralisation and local democratic agency. It also warns that excessive centralisation under martial law may weaken local autonomy and long-term resilience. Local government associations are seen as important channels through which municipalities can influence national decisions. This suggests

that democratic resilience in wartime requires balance: centralised defence policy and national coordination must coexist with decentralised civilian crisis management and meaningful local input.

9. Democratic resilience as a social contract

A broader interpretation across the studies is that Ukraine's democratic resilience reflects a changing social contract after the Revolution of Dignity. Citizens increasingly expect transparency, participation, accountability, and responsiveness from public authorities. Civil society actors feel entitled to demand that officials keep their promises. Local governments, in turn, have increasingly engaged with citizens, businesses, experts, and civic groups through dialogue and collaborative problem-solving. The ICLD research report on anti-corruption political will by Keudel, Grimes and Huss describe this as a move away from Soviet-style hierarchical relations toward more democratic accountability and trust-based state-society relations. The resilience report shows how these practices became useful during wartime crisis response. The humanitarian trust study adds that people's willingness to trust institutions and organisations depends on whether conduct matches democratic expectations: fairness, transparency, respect, responsiveness, and accountability.

This is perhaps the central insight of ICLD's democratic resilience work: resilience is not only the ability to endure shocks. It is the ability to preserve and adapt democratic relationships under pressure.

10. Concluding insights

Taken together, the studies suggest that KSE's and ICLD's democratic resilience-connected research in Ukraine has resulted in three core

findings. First, local democracy is a practical resilience tool. Participation, transparency, accountability and equity help communities respond to crisis, mobilise resources, maintain legitimacy and adapt to changing conditions. This is especially strong when democratic practices and community spaces already existed before the crisis. Second, resilience depends on trust-based collaboration. Decentralised local governments can respond quickly and contextually, but only when they have the autonomy, capacity and coordination channels needed to work with national authorities, civil society, businesses, humanitarian actors and residents. Third, communication and facilitation are essential for democratic resilience. Anti-corruption reform, humanitarian trust and crisis response all depend on repeated interaction, shared problem definition, transparent information, mutual commitments and intermediaries who can bridge institutions and communities.

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