

RESPONSIVE LOCAL GOVERNANCE MATTERS

Insights for Strengthening Citizen Participation from wartime Ukraine



Introduction

Since 2014, Ukraine's decentralization and open government reforms have resulted in a democratic local governance system with varied forms and levels of citizen participation (Aasland and Lyska, 2020; Arends et al., 2023). Since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, this system has faced overlapping war-related pressures, including physical insecurity, forced displacement, energy blackouts, and economic downturns. Citizens' and civil society engagement in defense and societal resilience has been high and, at the local level, has significantly supported local governments in addressing these pressures (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 2023; Keudel et al., 2024). At the same time, many local governments have retained pre-invasion mechanisms that allow citizens to engage in local decision-making rather than emergency response (Transparent Cities, 2026). However, only around 5% of the population de facto uses institutional channels of local democracy (Center for Innovations Development, 2025). Previous studies also found that participants reported conflicts and a lack of trust in engagement with local authorities (Hatsko and Darkovich, 2024).

This brief presents the most effective ways to promote citizen participation in local issues during wartime. War presents a unique environment characterized by significant physical danger, mental and physical fatigue for both citizens and officials, and geopolitical instability. As a result, the brief also explores how citizens perceive wartime conditions and how these perceptions influence participatory behaviors. Ukraine serves as a case study of active local democracy within an environment that supports participation but faces multiple crises due to a full-scale Russian invasion. These insights are valuable for other societies that, while not experiencing an existential war threat, still face uncertainty and fluctuating citizen engagement.

The brief is based on a mixed-methods study, conducted in 2025-2026 (Keudel et al., 2026). We gathered quantitative data through two large-scale online surveys: Survey 1, conducted from April to June 2026 with 1,218 Ukrainians and featuring a factorial vignette experiment (Karakai & Moskotina, 2026), and Survey 2, conducted in August 2026 with 1,049 Ukrainians. Qualitative data included exploratory interviews with leaders from eight hromadas in late 2025 and seven citizen focus groups involving 59 participants from regions heavily impacted by the war in early 2026. These focus groups included vulnerable social groups and were balanced in gender and age. The analysis combines statistical hypothesis testing with MAXQDA-based content analysis, allowing for systematic triangulation across surveys, the experiment, interviews, and focus groups. Validation methods included cross-checking insights from citizens and LSG perspectives, a dedicated stakeholder event in Kyiv, and peer review of the vignette design.

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It is based on the ICLD Research Report “Citizen engagement in times of polycrisis: Learning from Ukraine’s communities during Russia’s Full-Scale Invasion” (Keudel, O., Darkovich, A., Lukeria, T., Karakai, D., & Moskotina, R., 2026).

Authors:

Oleksandra Keudel*, Andrii Darkovich*, Tetiana Lukeria*

*Kyiv School of Economics Center for Democratic Resilience



Oleksandra Keudel



Andrii Darkovich



Tetiana Lukeria

KSE | Kyiv
School of
Economics

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Citizen participation: definition and mechanisms

Citizen participation in our study means active involvement in local decision-making beyond elections or private social interactions. For the surveys, we measure citizen participation through eleven concrete actions people may take in their community, asking how often they engaged in each over the past year. These actions span six core forms of participation – direct contact, consultation, dialogue, protest, partnership/co-production, and civil society engagement – each captured by specific survey items and measured on a simple frequency scale. All forms are treated as equally valid ways for citizens to shape policies, services, and decisions in everyday local governance. For the qualitative tools, we let interview partners define participation, although their responses also group into these six core forms of participation.

We examined a wide range of push factors (people’s beliefs, motivations, and personal stakes) and pull factors (how local governments create or block opportunities to engage) to identify what might shape citizen participation. In simple terms, we tested whether people’s sense of political efficacy, personal stakes, satisfaction with services, trust in local government, perceived responsiveness, and accessibility of participation influence how often they get involved. We also controlled for slow-changing factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and institutional legacies. This brief presents only the most meaningful results from these checks.



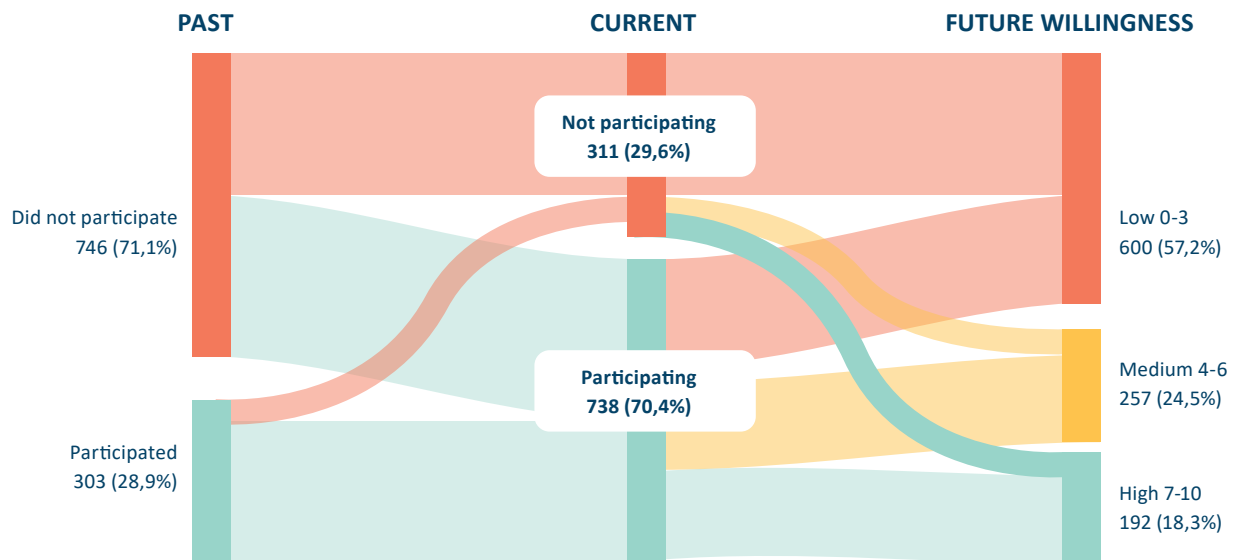
Small-group discussion during the Zhytomyr Citizens’ Assembly on Sustainable Urban Mobility, October–November 2025, conducted within the EU Horizon project BRIDGE (grant agreement 101160337). Photo: BRIDGE

Participation trajectories during war: citizens' perspective

Citizens report increased participation during the war

Our self-reported local democracy engagement data align with other findings that many people became more engaged during the full-scale Russian invasion than before (Figure 1). Although not representative of the Ukrainian population, our data show a plausible **pattern of a substantial increase in participation intensity**: 70.4% of Sample 2 report at least one form of engagement in local decision-making during the war, while only about a quarter (28.9%) of the same sample report being active before it. This increase is driven by 44.1% of previously non-engaged individuals reporting current participation. Among respondents who reported participation before the full-scale Russian invasion, most remained active, with only 2.7% reporting they stopped, indicating very low attrition.

Figure 1 Respondents' reported participation trajectories



Note: N = 1049 (Survey 2). Vertical bars, left to right, indicate respondents' participation in local decision-making before the full-scale Russian invasion ("past"), during the past 12 months while the survey was fielded during the invasion ("current"), and likelihood of participating in the 12 months after the survey ("future"). Red indicates non-participation, green indicates participation, and yellow indicates medium likelihood in the future. All % refer to the total sample N.

Wartime barriers to citizen participation

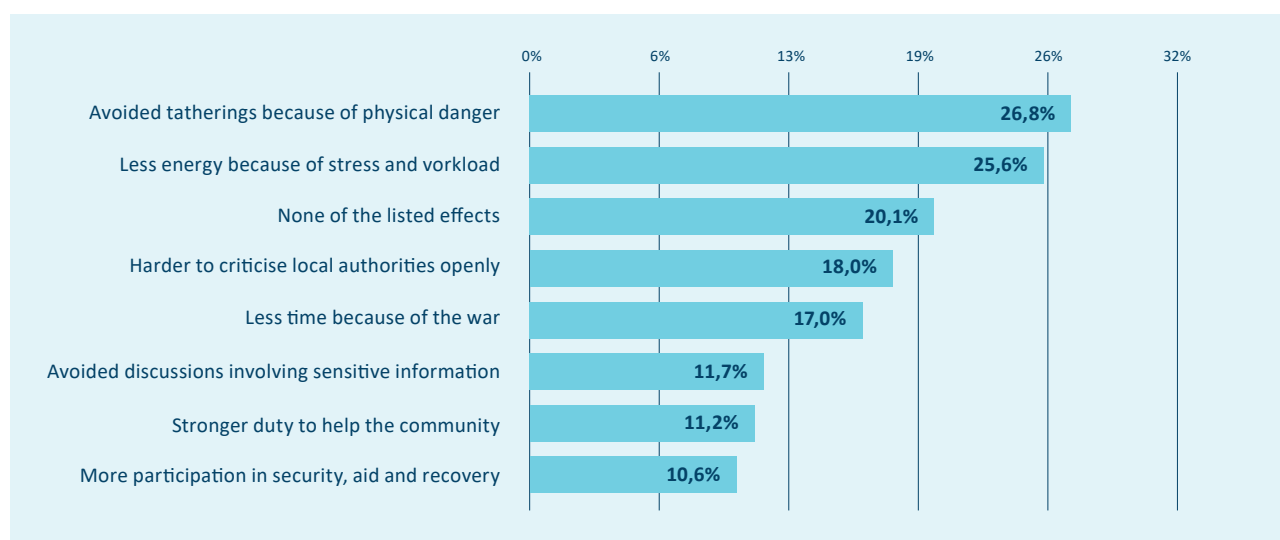
“We have strikes very often, really very often - sometimes every day or every other day - and this greatly interferes with participation; it even makes it difficult just to go outside.”

Svitlana, 36, FGD 7, South, participant from a vulnerable group

The reported effects of the full-scale Russian invasion on respondents’ participation in local democracy are mixed. About a fifth of the sample reported none of the ten possible effects, **but avoiding gatherings because of physical insecurity and having less energy for participation because of stress and workload** (about a quarter each, Figure 2) are the most prominently reported effects of war on one’s local democracy participation.

These barriers also show a regional pattern: while our data is observational and cannot establish causality, paired comparisons and after controls show statistically significant differences in how often respondents reported them in regions closer to active warfare than those farther from the frontlines. Thus, after adjustment for gender, age, education, material wellbeing, language, and settlement size, the average marginal effects between respondents from the southern regions exceeded those for Kyiv respondents in avoiding gatherings because of physical danger by 13.4 points, 95 percent CI [3.5, 23.3], and exceeded those for respondents from the west of Ukraine in reduced energy due to stress and workload by 13.4 points, 95 percent CI [4.3, 22.4]. The two latter observations probably reflect the fact that Mykolayiv, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts are under constant russian attack, including in some cities by FPV drones indiscriminately targeting civilians as they go about daily routines.

Figure 2 Self-reported effects of the full-scale Russian invasion on participation patterns

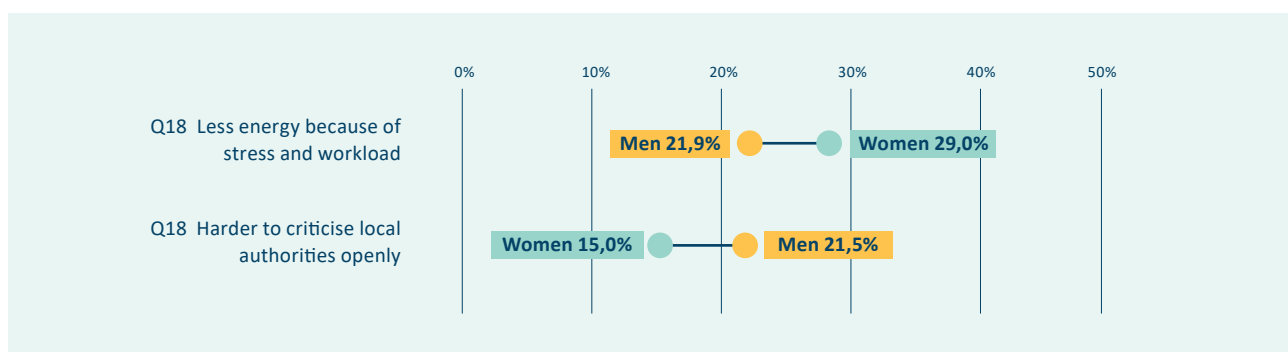


Note: N=1049 (Survey 2). The chart highlights effects mentioned by at least 1 in 10 respondents.

Similarly, participants from western Ukraine report, statistically, more often than respondents from northern and southern Ukraine that, with the full-scale Russian invasion, they began engaging in security, aid, and recovery and felt a stronger duty to help the community.

Eighteen percent found it harder to criticize local authorities openly, and men reported these effects more often than women. Women were more likely than men to report having less energy because of stress and workload. These responses may illustrate gendered wartime burdens: while men face conscription and may worry about drawing attention to avoid it, women may take on more care and professional responsibilities while men serve in the armed forces (Figure 3). At the same time, 17.0 percent reported having less time, and there was no meaningful difference between men and women.

Figure 3 Gender-based differences in self-reported effects of the full-scale Russian invasion on participation patterns



Note: N=1049 (Survey 2). Only gaps of at least 5 percentage points are shown. Q18: “Which statements about how the full-scale invasion has affected your personal involvement in community affairs do you agree with the most?” (select up to 3 you agree with most).

While other data do not allow causal conclusions, the same data offer at least a partial explanation: respondents from southern regions especially report avoiding gatherings more because of physical insecurity and participating less because of war-related stress. Simply put, life closer to the frontlines requires more focus on survival and leaves fewer opportunities for democratic engagement, while life further away also leaves more space for civic engagement.

Citizens participate if their efforts yield results

One's perception that participation yields results is most strongly associated with how often citizens participate in local democracy, regardless of participants' socio-demographic characteristics and the region in which they live.

Political efficacy and citizen participation

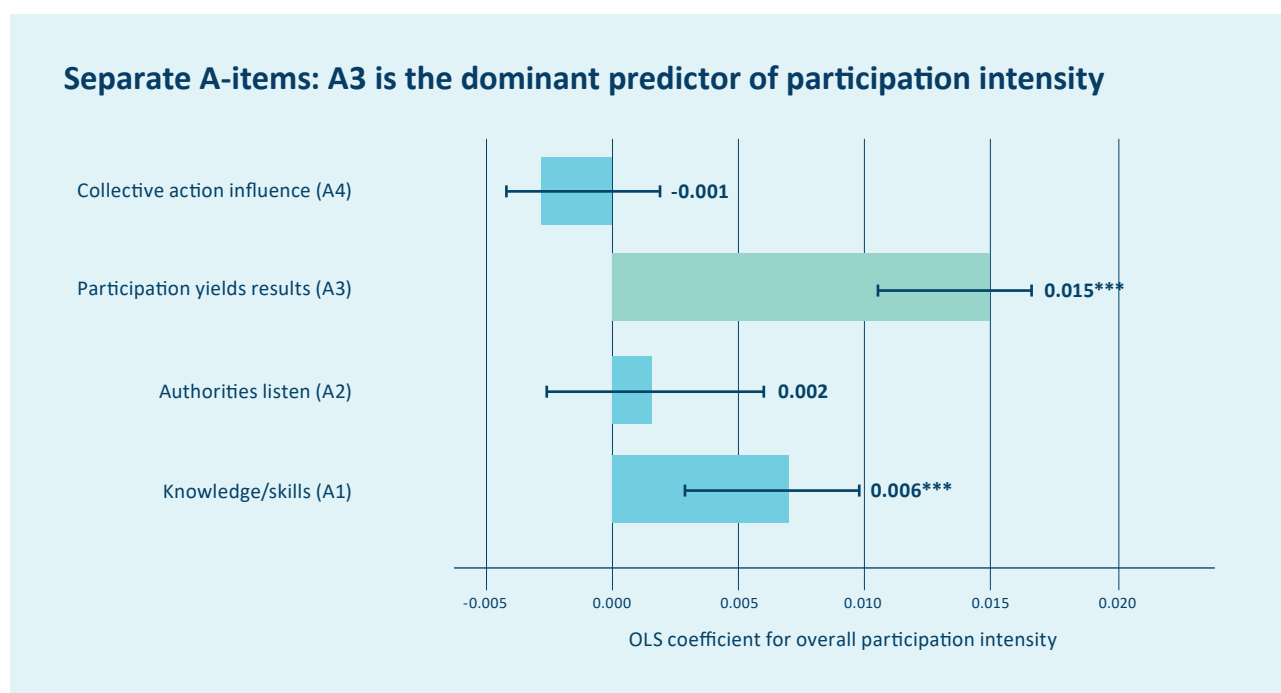
Citizen participation literature emphasizes that political efficacy, defined as one's sense of capacity and meaning for engagement, is a significant factor in citizens' decisions about whether to participate in local democracy (Lebrument et al., 2021; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). In our study, political efficacy comprised four elements:

- A1: I have enough knowledge and skills to participate in addressing issues important to my community (“**knowledge/skills**”)
- A2: Local authorities in my community take into account the opinions of people like me (“**authorities listen**”)
- A3: My participation in community life usually produces tangible results (“**participation yields results**”). An option, “do not participate,” was available.
- A4: If people like me act together, they can influence local government decisions (“**collective action influence**”)

We ran an OLS regression to identify which element of political efficacy best predicts citizen participation intensity (Figure 4). **We find that by and large, the perception that “participation yields results” (A3) is the dominant predictor of overall participation intensity.**

In this model, one's sense of having “knowledge and skills” (A1) remains positive and significant. Perception that “authorities listen” (A2) and that “collective action [brings] influence (A4)” have no independent effects once A1 and A3 are included. This suggests that the key mechanism is an individual's confidence that participation can produce tangible results.

Figure 4 OLS regression coefficients for political efficacy indicators predicting overall participation intensity



Note: HC3 robust standard errors and 95% confidence intervals are shown. N = 1,218 (Survey 1)

Box 1: Tips from Ukrainian municipalities on visibility of participation results

- Publication of consultation results with clear explanations of which proposals were accepted.
- Visual “before–after” reports using photos.
- Short weekly social-media and chats (Telegram, Viber) updates on the status of local problems or projects and citizens’ requests that have been implemented.
- Open public lists of current issues and their resolution status.
- Regular reports from starostas (village representatives) to residents.
- Public explanations for delays or changes in decisions.

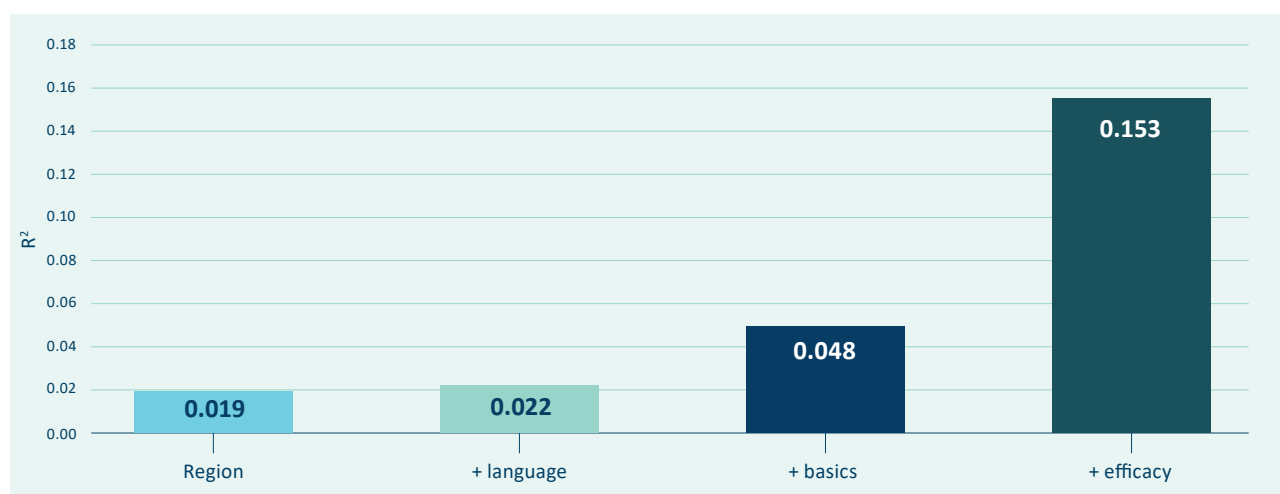
Seeing results trumps regional legacies, language and socio-demographic characteristics

“[...]when people write, and there is no response, they start to become disappointed. They begin to wonder whether it is worth participating in this or that issue at all if nothing comes of what they previously did, wrote, or tried to achieve.”

Andriy, 40, FGD 3, North, participant from a vulnerable group

Since citizens' reported trajectories of participation had regional specifics, we also examined whether the elements of political efficacy have different importance for people in different regions of Ukraine (Figure 5; see regression tables in Table 17 in Annex 4 of the full report). We find that a model containing only region variables accounts for a very small share (1.9%) of the variation in citizen participation intensity, indicating weak explanatory power. Adding language adds little explanatory power beyond region (together, these factors explain only 2.2% of the variation in citizen participation intensity). In this model, Ukrainian-only language practice is positively associated with participation intensity ($b \approx 0.017$, $p \approx 0.046$). Adding socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, for which we previously controlled in our analysis of the relationship between political efficacy and participation, yields only a minor improvement in the model's explanatory power to 4.8%. Moreover, after adding age, education, and material well-being, Ukrainian language use becomes marginal ($b \approx 0.016$, $p \approx 0.075$). At the same time, once we add political efficacy, the model's explanatory power increases almost fourfold to 15.3%, and language use becomes non-significant ($b \approx 0.006$, $p \approx 0.584$).

Figure 5 OLS models fit for participation intensity across nested specifications



Note: “Basics” denotes socio-demographic characteristics of respondents. “Efficacy” includes internal and external political efficacy. See the regression table in Annex 4.

Feedback shapes future willingness to participate

Across all methods in this study, the quality of authorities' feedback on citizens' ideas and proposals emerges as a precondition for participation, and both citizens and authorities agree on this. We find that people who report receiving clearer, more useful feedback after participating are also more willing to participate in the future.

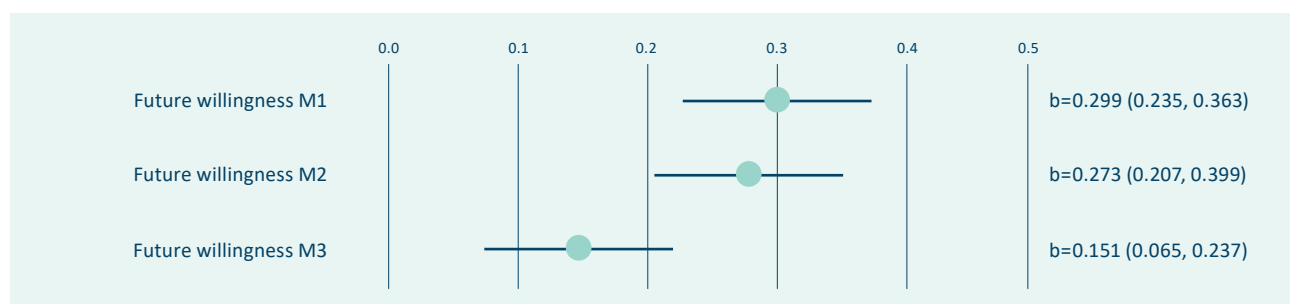
“Whenever particularly important decisions were being made in our community, the mayor [...] posts videos on Facebook where he explains why exactly those decisions were made, why the money was allocated in a particular way. [...] People ask questions in the comments, and he responds to them. He is very active in that regard.”

Tetiana, 40, FGD 1, East, participant from a vulnerable group

Part of this relationship overlaps with prior participation experience and other attitudes, but feedback still shows an independent association once these factors are considered together. Figure 6 shows a positive relationship across all three models. In the simplest model, a one-point increase in feedback quality is associated with a 0.299-point increase in future willingness. The association remains after accounting for respondents' basic characteristics ($b = 0.273$) and becomes smaller but remains statistically significant in the full model ($b = 0.151$, 95% CI [0.065, 0.237], $p < .001$).

Feedback quality is also positively associated with citizens' belief that participation yields results and that authorities listen ($b = 0.182$, 95% CI [0.128, 0.237], $p < .001$). In other words, respondents who receive better feedback are also more likely to feel that participation can matter and that local authorities are responsive. Because these measures come from the same survey wave, however, we cannot determine whether better feedback increases efficacy or whether more efficacious respondents evaluate feedback more positively.

Figure 6 Feedback quality and future willingness to participate



Note: N M1, M2 = 804, N M3 = 739 (Survey 2). Unstandardized OLS coefficients with HC3 95 percent confidence intervals (Annex 5 in full report).

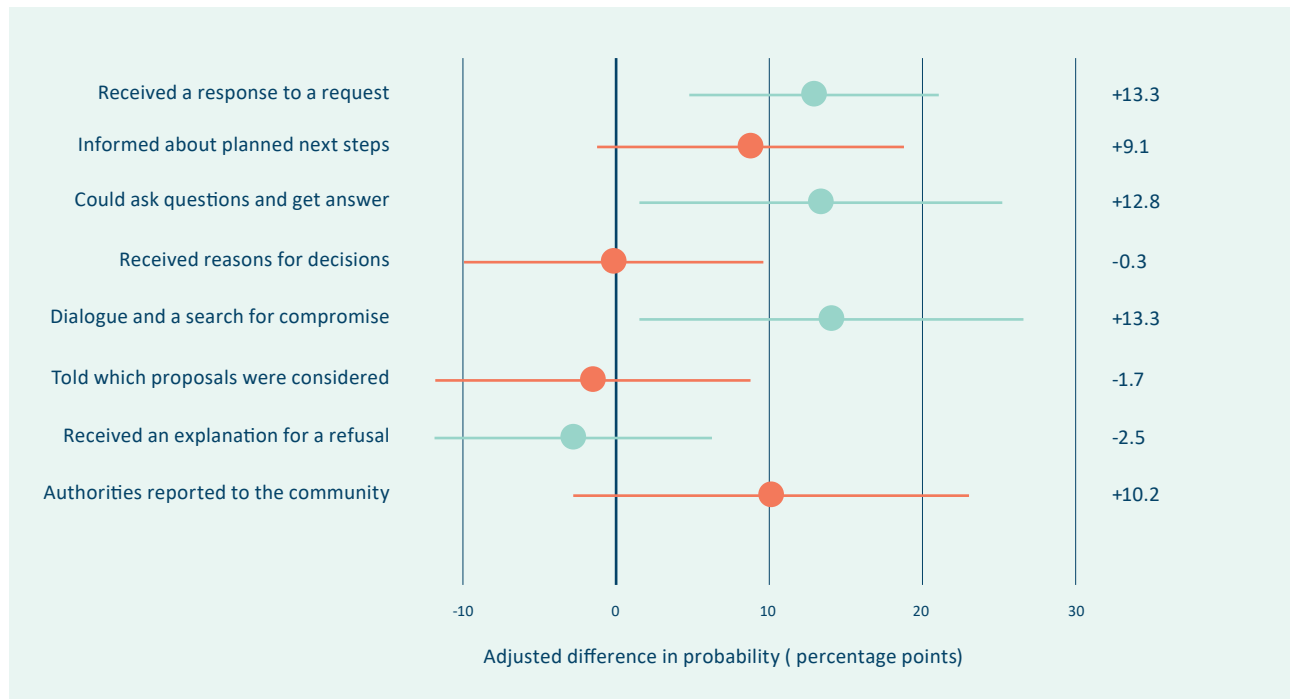
What counts as good feedback

Asking respondents to evaluate feedback quality and identify actions from local authorities revealed three standout actions, even after accounting for factors like age, gender, education, well-being, language, settlement size, region, and prior participation (Figure 7). First, **receiving a response to a request** is associated with a 13.3 percentage point higher probability of strong agreement (95% interval: 5.7 to 20.9 points). It is the only action that passes the correction for testing eight actions. Second, dialogue and efforts to find a compromise, and third, being able to ask questions and receive answers. Evidence for the latter two actions is less consistent across the additional checks.

Box 2: Tips from Ukrainian municipalities on responses to citizen requests

- Use plain, straightforward language
- Inform residents when registering a request about the next steps in the review process.
- Explain which decisions can realistically be made within the community's legal powers.
- Provide an estimated timeline for when the issue will be considered.
- Share contact details of the responsible official or department so people know whom to reach.
- Use guidance notes or response templates for the most common types of requests.
- Flag any likely constraints or factors that may affect how quickly the issue can be resolved.

Source: Lukeria et al, 2026

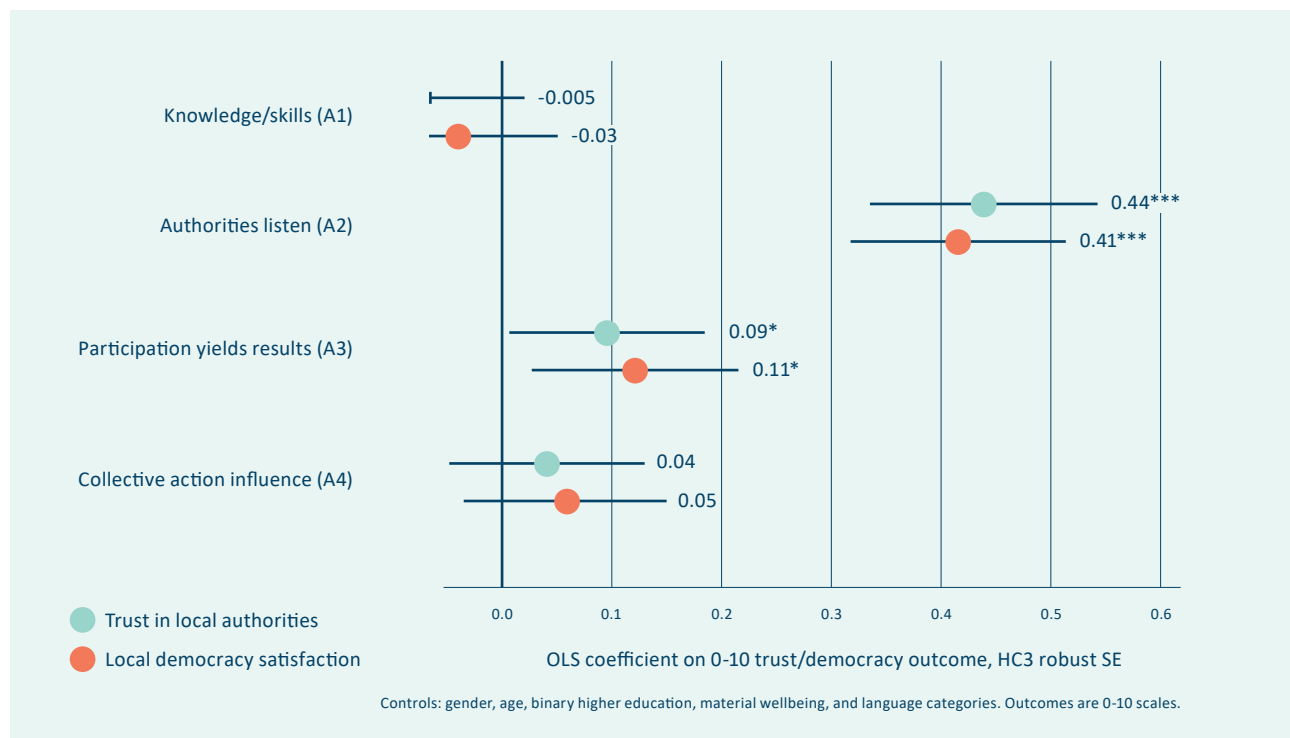
Figure 7 Good feedback according to citizens

Note: The figure shows the adjusted difference in strong agreement that authorities provided feedback (7-10 points on a 0-10 agreement scale). Each action reported vs. not reported. N=639 (Survey 2). Controls: age, gender, education, material wellbeing, language, settlement size, region and prior participation. Dots show estimates; lines show 95% confidence intervals. Gold intervals include 0, so results are not statistically significant. Only receiving a response passes the correction for testing eight actions (5% false discovery rate).

Perception that authorities listen matters for citizens' trust in local government and local democracy satisfaction

As Figure 8 shows, the perception that authorities listen (“take into account the opinions of people like me”) does not significantly affect the intensity of citizen participation. Instead, institutional responsiveness proved more important for citizens' trust in local government and their satisfaction with local democracy than any other component of political efficacy.

Figure 8 OLS regression coefficients for political efficacy indicators predicting trust in LSG & local democracy satisfaction



Note: Controls included: gender, age, binary higher education, material well-being, language practice. Outcomes are on 0-10 scale. N= 1,218 (Survey 1).

Recommendations: Design participation for results and plan for feedback to foster future participation

The experience of Ukrainian citizens and local authorities in engaging in local democracy during the full-scale Russian invasion shows two things. First, the war disproportionately affects living conditions, so one cannot expect the same levels of citizen engagement in regions directly affected by hostilities as in those that are geographically more remote. People in regions closer to the frontlines report higher physical insecurity and stress and overload as barriers to participation. The only sustainable way to overcome these barriers – though beyond the scope of this study or the mandate of the local authorities – is a lasting and just peace for Ukraine.

Second, local authorities can take steps even under trying circumstances. This study shows that perceptions that participation yields results are most strongly associated with participation intensity, regardless of respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and the region they live in. Feedback quality after participation shapes future willingness to participate in local democracy. Thus, what local authorities do with citizen participation outputs matters for citizens' willingness to participate in local democracy.

Thus, at the strategic level, the **question of how citizen participation events and processes can yield results** should guide their design and implementation from the outset. This is because local authorities' responsiveness enhances legitimacy, as the perception that authorities listen increases public trust in them. Steps to this end include, but are not limited to:

1. **Schedule participatory processes early in the decision-making process, focusing on issues that matter in citizens' everyday lives.** Citizens cannot be expected to provide detailed feedback on a full local strategy document written in a legalistic manner, but most people can compare the merits of specific proposals for services, utilities, or infrastructure in their community.
2. **Structuring participatory processes so that results are feasible and actionable.** Too often, open-ended processes produce a wishlist that is not feasible to implement, while rigid public hearings either silence most participants or become stages for nonconstructive expressions of mutual frustration. Facilitated deliberative processes should be considered wherever possible to mitigate these drawbacks.

At the operational level of specific citizen participation and public engagement processes, LSGs should:

3. **Clearly link LSG decisions to citizen participation in public communications.** For example, if a council considers a policy change that was also requested or endorsed through a public participation process, it should prominently highlight that fact across multiple communication channels. To do this, communication and policy teams in LSGs should coordinate their work.
4. **Communicate any follow-up steps or decisions to participants in clear language.** Because policy decisions take time and citizens' suggestions rarely translate immediately into tangible results, communicate meaningful interim steps as well. In practice, this means establishing post-communication and feedback loops that help citizens sign up for and receive such updates.
5. **Explain the rationale for not accepting proposals, delays, or changes to planned results.** Research partners acknowledged that not all citizens' proposals may be actionable, but they emphasized the need for honest dialogue about feasibility. The validation event also showed that discussing alternatives with the citizens who submitted the original proposal could help reduce frustration.
6. **Have the courage to accept the results.** If the participatory process produced thoroughly deliberated outcomes, authorities should be open to acting on them, even if they do not match the original vision.

Discussion questions for local officials and politicians

- 1 Do our participatory processes start early enough in the decision cycle for citizens to meaningfully shape options, or are we only consulting them once decisions are nearly finalized?
- 2 Are we focusing participation on issues that matter in people's daily lives, rather than expecting citizens to comment on long, technical strategy documents?
- 3 Does the format we use (hearing, consultation, deliberation) reliably produce actionable outcomes, or does it tend to generate wishlists, frustration, or silence? What should we do differently to create more actionable outcomes?
- 4 Do we clearly communicate how citizen input influenced decisions, across multiple channels, and coordinate this messaging between policy and communication teams?
- 5 Do we provide timely follow-up and honest explanations — including why some proposals were not accepted — so citizens see progress and understand constraints?

Further reading:

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