



Polaris

Supporting Multilevel
Governance in Ukraine

INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY FOR SUCCESSFUL DECENTRALISATION

Guidelines on the Institutional
Development of Local Government
Associations in Ukraine: European and
Swedish Experience of Polaris Experts

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We dedicate this publication to the cherished memory of Ayder Seitomanov — our colleague on the Polaris team, an outstanding expert and devoted public figure. Throughout his life he served his people, Ukraine, and the cause of democracy, championing the development of local communities and working tirelessly to strengthen dialogue and understanding between people. His wisdom, kindness, and devotion to his values will forever remain a source of inspiration for us.

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INTRODUCTION

These Guidelines have been developed to support the institutional development of Local Government Associations (LGAs) in Ukraine during a period of profound upheaval, accelerated reforms, and existential national challenges.

Local self-government in Ukraine has demonstrated its role as one of the fundamental pillars of the Ukrainian democratic state, a source of institutional and societal resilience during wartime, and a guarantor of long-term and sustainable recovery. In this context, strengthening LGAs should not be regarded merely as a technical or administrative support measure, but rather as a strategic investment in the resilience of Ukrainian democracy, the effectiveness of decentralisation, and the development of transparent, accountable, and citizen-oriented governance. Strong and capable LGAs are indispensable for safeguarding local democracy, articulating and representing the common position of communities, and ensuring that national reforms effectively reflect the real needs, challenges, and aspirations of communities throughout Ukraine.

The purpose of these Guidelines is to strengthen the institutional capacity of Ukrainian LGAs by enhancing their ability to effectively represent the interests of their members, provide expert support, contribute to national reform processes, and act as reliable partners both for the Government of Ukraine and for international stakeholders. In mature European democracies, strong local government associations have played a decisive role in shaping decentralisation policies, safeguarding local autonomy, and coordinating the development of high-quality public services.

Their experience demonstrates that well-organised associations strengthen the collective voice of local governments, facilitate the establishment of common standards, and create professional platforms for dialogue between local and central levels of government.

LGAs perform several essential functions: they formulate and articulate the shared interests of communities, coordinate advocacy efforts, provide expert support and training to their members, and promote intermunicipal cooperation. Particularly in times of crisis, LGAs serve as channels for coordinated communication, mutual assistance, and collective decision-making. Their work directly contributes to transparency, accountability, and the overall stability of the local self-government system.

The Swedish-Ukrainian Polaris Programme: Supporting Multilevel Governance in Ukraine (2024-2028), financed by the Government of Sweden through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and implemented by SALAR International, forms part of Sweden's long-term commitment to strengthening good governance in the region and reflects its role – together with Poland – as a co-initiator of the Eastern Partnership.

This consistent support includes long-standing assistance to decentralisation and local self-government reforms in Ukraine.

Within this framework, the Polaris Programme has created a unique opportunity to combine structured analysis with direct technical, expert, and material support, drawing upon international experience and translating it into practical and targeted recommendations adapted to the specific conditions and needs of local self-government in Ukraine.

Sweden's long-standing tradition of strong municipal associations, combined with more than a century of local autonomy and well-developed models of employer representation, demonstrates how institutionalised advocacy, professional expertise, and membership-based governance can provide a solid foundation for the modern and effective development of LGAs in Ukraine.

This document is based on European standards, including the European Charter of Local Self-Government, as well as comparative experience from Sweden, Poland, and other EU Member States. It identifies the key components of democratic, transparent, and financially sustainable governance of LGAs; outlines core advocacy mechanisms; proposes methods for strengthening member participation; and highlights opportunities for international cooperation and digital innovation.

These Guidelines were prepared by **Magnus Liljeström, Yuliia Savelieva, Ayder Seitosmanov, and Krzysztof Stanowski** – experts of the Polaris Programme – together with Serhii Sharshov, Deputy Executive Director of the All-Ukrainian Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities (AATC) and expert of the "Legislation for Communities" Platform.

The implementation of these Guidelines will strengthen the capacity of Ukrainian LGAs to more effectively protect local interests, support decentralisation reform, and contribute to Ukraine's European integration process. The ultimate objective is to foster a strong, coherent, and representative LGA sector that enhances the quality of local democracy, strengthens the institutional resilience of communities, and promotes a forward-looking and collaborative model of governance.

EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE



Institutional Structure of Local Government Associations in Europe

Already in the early twentieth century, municipalities in several European countries began forming associations after recognising the benefits of cooperation. The key motivations behind the establishment of such organisations remain relevant today and may be regarded as the "DNA" of Local Government Associations (LGAs):

- Advocacy – strengthening the position of local governments in their relations with central government and state institutions;
- Improvement of municipal services – providing advisory support to members, as well as developing and disseminating good practices;
- Platform for communication – creating opportunities for experience-sharing, networking, and cooperation among members.

In some countries, LGAs also evolved into employers' organisations, negotiating national collective agreements with trade unions on working conditions and remuneration for municipal employees. There are also examples of LGAs operating as mutual insurance institutions for their members.

In countries with strong mayoral systems, LGAs have sometimes been perceived primarily as associations of mayors. In most other systems, however, the municipality itself – as a legal entity – is the member of the association.

In 1913, the first initiative to unite municipalities beyond national borders was launched through the establishment of the *Union Internationale des Villes*. This organisation later evolved into today's *United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)*, which brings together both individual cities and LGAs.

At the European level, the *Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)* was established in 1951, initially as the *Council of European Municipalities*. Today, CEMR unites 60 national associations of local and regional governments from 41 countries.

"Local authorities shall be entitled, in exercising their powers, to co-operate and, within the framework of the law, to form consortia with other local authorities in order to carry out tasks of common interest.

The entitlement of local authorities to belong to an association for the protection and promotion of their common interests and to belong to an international association of local authorities shall be recognised in each State."

– Article 10, European Charter of Local Self-Government

The European Charter of Local Self-Government, adopted by the Council of Europe in 1985 and ratified by Ukraine in 1997, is the fundamental legal instrument affirming the rights and autonomy of local governments.

It establishes key principles of local self-government, including subsidiarity, adequate financial resources, legal protection, and citizen participation. For LGAs, the Charter serves as a normative foundation underpinning their role as representatives, advocates, and defenders of local autonomy.

Sweden

The modern system of local and regional self-government in Sweden took shape following the municipal reform of 1862. The first local government association – the Swedish Association of Cities (Svenska Stadsförbundet) – was established in 1908. An association representing rural municipalities was created ten years later.

In 1968, the two organisations merged to form the Swedish Association of Local Authorities (Svenska Kommunförbundet). The latest major merger took place in 2007, when the Swedish Federation of County Councils (Landstingsförbundet, established in 1920) merged with the Swedish Association of Local Authorities (Svenska Kommunförbundet) to create the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR; Swedish: Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting – SKL, later renamed Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner – SKR).

One of the key drivers behind these mergers was the role of LGAs as employers' organisations negotiating national agreements with trade unions representing employees of local and regional authorities. The organisations also recognised that a unified position strengthened their influence in negotiations with national (and later also with European) institutions.

SALAR employs approximately 490 staff members, most of whom are experts in fields relevant to the responsibilities of municipalities and regions. The organisation includes large departments specialising in legal affairs, communications, and financial analysis.

SALAR also owns, either fully or through majority shareholdings, a number of companies that provide important services to member municipalities and regions.

These companies operate in such areas as quality assurance in medical laboratories and diagnostics, digitalisation, and procurement. Separate entities are also responsible for the management of SALAR's financial assets and property portfolio.

SALAR holds a 50 per cent share in the company operating Sweden's 112 emergency call service and a significant minority shareholding in the company managing the pension fund for employees of member authorities. SALAR International, which is responsible for the implementation of international development cooperation projects, is also part of the wider SALAR group.

The association's annual income amounts to approximately EUR 120 million, while the combined income of the associated group of companies reaches around EUR 180 million.

Poland

The roots of local self-government in Poland date back to the Middle Ages, when cities were granted Magdeburg rights and local communities gradually acquired elements of self-governance. Following the restoration of Polish independence in 1918, local self-government operated on democratic principles, although its autonomy gradually weakened over time. After the Second World War, under the communist system, local self-government was effectively abolished through subordination to state administration.

In the 1990s, Poland implemented one of the most profound systemic reforms in Central and Eastern Europe, beginning with economic and municipal reforms.

Already during the "Solidarity" movement (1980-1981), local government reform had been identified as a key issue. The slogan "Self-Governing Republic" became one of the principal ideas of the First National Congress of "Solidarity".

The 1990 reform, adopted by the Sejm less than 180 days after the formation of the first democratic government, restored municipal self-government as a foundation of democracy by granting local communities both powers and financial resources.

In 1999, counties (powiats) and regions (voivodeships) were introduced, creating a three-tier system of governance.

The essence of the reform was the transfer of real powers and responsibilities to local communities. According to Article 163 of the 1997 Constitution of Poland, "Local government shall perform public tasks not reserved by the Constitution or statutes to the organs of other public authorities.."

The restoration of local self-government, which had effectively been abolished under the communist regime, not only restored legal subjectivity to local communities but also laid the foundations for effective local governance. In the longer term, this became one of the key factors in Poland's alignment with European standards.

One of the most visible examples of the success of Polish local governance was the profound improvement in the quality of school education following the transfer of educational responsibilities to local governments. During and after Poland's accession to the European Union, effective local government also became a crucial factor enabling the country to absorb EU structural funds and implement cohesion policy mechanisms effectively.

Development of Local Government Organisations after 1990

Following the reforms of the 1990s, several pre-war organisations were re-established, including the Association of Polish Cities (known in Polish as *Związek Miast Polskich*, founded in 1917) and the Association of Polish Counties (*Związek Powiatów Polskich*, ZPP). New national and regional associations also emerged. These organisations are voluntary and democratic in nature; they represent common interests, facilitate experience-sharing, address shared challenges, engage in advocacy, and promote international cooperation.

The most important associations include:

- Association of Polish Cities (*Związek Miast Polskich*, 370 cities);
- Association of Polish Counties (*Związek Powiatów Polskich*, 308 counties and cities with county rights);
- Union of Polish Metropolises (*Unia Metropolii Polskich*, 12 largest cities);
- Association of Rural Municipalities (Communities) of the Republic of Poland (*Związek Gmin Wiejskich Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, more than 600 rural and mixed municipalities, known as gminas);
- Association of Polish Voivodeships (*Związek Województw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, all self-governing regions).

There are also dozens of regional and thematic associations, such as the Association of Municipalities of the Lublin Voivodeship (*Związek Gmin Lubelszczyzny*), the Union of Spa Municipalities (*Stowarzyszenie Gmin Uzdrawiskowych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*), and the Union of Polish Small Towns (*Unia Miasteczek Polskich*).

These associations operate on the principles of voluntary membership, equality of all members, and collective decision-making. Each municipality (gmina), county (powiat), or region (voivodship) is free to join or leave an association.

For example, the city of Białystok withdrew from the Association of Polish Cities in 2004 and rejoined in 2019. These organisations are characterised by democratic and flexible leadership rotation – since 1991, the Association of Polish Cities has had five different presidents. It is noteworthy that neither the President of the Association of Polish Cities nor the President of the Union of Polish Metropolises has ever been the Mayor of Warsaw, despite the capital's political and demographic dominance.

Within the internal structures of these associations, numerous thematic committees operate in specific areas of local policy. For example, the Association of Polish Cities currently maintains 21 committees involving more than 650 representatives of member municipalities. Their work covers such areas as education, finance, public safety and order, municipal services, environmental protection, climate policy, sport, culture, EU affairs, external relations, human rights, urban policy, urban development, transport, tourism, public administration, municipal councils, spatial planning, and public-private partnerships.

Under Polish legislation, LGAs are required to publish their statutes, governance structures, and annual reports.

In practice, they also generally disclose membership lists and key decisions adopted by their governing bodies. These associations do not receive core funding from the state budget. Their primary source of income consists of membership fees, which range from PLN 0.27 (approximately EUR 0.063) per resident in the case of the Association of Polish Counties to PLN 0.63 (approximately EUR 0.15) per resident in the case of the Association of Rural Communes. Additional income is generated through grants for the implementation of specific projects.

Polish LGAs actively participate in public debate on national policy while remaining institutionally independent from political parties. Although the presidents of these associations, in their roles as mayors, often represent political parties or local electoral committees, they generally do not hold senior positions within national party structures.

Although local self-government authorities and their associations in Poland do not possess a formal right of legislative initiative, they nevertheless influence legislation through participation in parliamentary committees and through the Joint Commission of the Government and Local Self-Government (*Komisja Wspólna Rządu i Samorządu Terytorialnego, KWRiST*).

Established in 1993 as an advisory body to the Council of Ministers, the Commission serves as a platform for developing joint positions between the Government and local self-government authorities. It consists of 15 representatives of the Government and 15 representatives of local self-government. The local self-government representatives are delegated by nationwide LGAs officially recognised by the Council of Ministers for this purpose.

A new and rapidly developing category of LGAs has emerged within the framework of the Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) mechanism introduced during the 2014-2020 EU programming period.

These associations are established by municipalities and powiats cooperating within functional urban areas – clusters of cities and surrounding communities linked by economic, social, and functional ties. The purpose of ITIs is to coordinate investment activities at regional and local levels, ensure more effective use of EU funding, strengthen urban-rural linkages, and address shared development challenges.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATIONS IN UKRAINE – LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK



Development of Local Government Associations (LGAs) in Ukraine

The implementation of the local self-government reform in Ukraine resulted in a significant strengthening of the powers of local self-government authorities and a substantial increase in the financial capacity of territorial communities.

The success of the reform stemmed from the transformation of territorial communities from objects into subjects of public administration. In particular, the administrative and financial capacities of amalgamated territorial communities were strengthened, while their political leaders received broader powers to directly support the development of their local communities.

Fiscal decentralisation increased the interest of local self-government authorities in expanding local budget revenues, identifying additional revenue sources, and improving the efficiency of tax and fee administration.

As a result, the own-source revenues of the general fund of local budgets increased more than sixfold – from UAH 68.6 billion in 2014 to UAH 441.9 billion in 2023. At the same time, while in 2016 the share of own-source revenues of amalgamated territorial communities accounted for only 2.2% of the general fund of local budgets, by the beginning of 2022 this figure had risen to 24.4%. Between 2017 and 2022, the share of local budgets in the revenues of the consolidated state budget of Ukraine (excluding transfers) remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 22.3% and 24.4%. However, a significant decline to 17.3% was recorded at the beginning of 2023 as a consequence of the full-scale invasion.

Fiscal decentralisation ensured the transfer of financial resources from central government authorities and the subregional level to local self-government authorities at the basic level, while also creating the necessary material, financial, and organisational conditions for the exercise of both own and delegated powers by local self-government authorities.

In addition to increased financial resources, territorial communities gained access to substantial state investment instruments, including the State Regional Development Fund, subventions for the social and economic development of territories, and funding for the development of local infrastructure.

This required local self-government officials to acquire new skills, knowledge, and significantly higher qualifications in the fields of long-term planning and regional and local development project design.

Alongside the establishment of capable territorial communities, decentralisation processes were also implemented in the areas of education, healthcare, architectural and construction control, administrative service delivery, social and youth policy, and land administration. These sectoral reforms simultaneously formed part of broader sector-specific reform processes.

Sectoral reforms reflect the actual transfer of powers in individual policy areas and remain at different stages of implementation.

Under these circumstances, there emerged a clear need for coordinated action and consolidation among local self-government authorities and officials at regional, interregional, international, and national levels. Such coordination is typically ensured through specialised institutions such as Local Government Associations.

The consolidation of efforts among local self-government authorities and their associations is driven by a number of socio-economic and political factors, including the need to coordinate positions on key issues related to the territorial organisation of power in Ukraine and local and regional development; the development of economic and social relations within the state; European integration processes and the expansion of international territorial cooperation; as well as the allocation and effective use of limited resources for the provision of public services.

During the first years of the functioning of Ukraine's political system, under the influence of dominant local elites, a model of horizontal integration among municipal entities emerged that may conventionally be described as "bottom-up integration". This process was initiated by local self-government leaders seeking collective responses to the country's difficult social and economic situation, particularly economic challenges, as well as mechanisms for protecting the rights and interests of local self-government authorities.

This contributed to the establishment of informal and cooperative practices among members of both formalised and semi-formalised associations.

The formal starting point for the establishment and development of Local Government Associations (LGAs) in Ukraine may be considered the adoption of the Law of Ukraine *"On Local Councils of People's Deputies and Local and Regional Self-Government"* on 26 March 1992. In particular, Article 1 of the Law stipulated that local self-government authorities of villages, settlements, and cities could unite in associations and other forms of voluntary cooperation in order to exercise their rights and responsibilities more effectively. At the same time, the right of local self-government authorities to establish associations initially remained largely declaratory in nature due to the lack of clear legal and procedural mechanisms for its implementation.

However, the further deterioration of the social and economic situation in Ukraine, combined with the confrontation between the President and Parliament during the 1990s, prompted the state leadership to intensify reforms and seek support, as well as a form of political backing, from regional leaders. These processes encouraged local leaders to consolidate into respective political groupings.

The growing alignment between national and local elites led to the establishment of coordination structures in the form of regional associations of local self-government authorities.

Already at the initial stages of the integration of local self-government authorities during the first half of the 1990s, two main trends of consolidation could be identified: associations formed on the basis of economic and geographical proximity, and associations established around broader national priorities.

Associations created according to the economic and geographical principle included the Association of Mining Cities of Donbas, the Association of Dniester Cities of Ukraine, and the Association for Supporting the Activities of Local Councils and Industrial Facilities of South-Eastern Ukraine, among others.

Associations established around national priorities included the Association of Twin Cities of Ukraine (later renamed the Ukrainian Association of Local and Regional Authorities), the Association of Democratic Councils of People's Deputies of Ukraine and Democratic Blocs in Councils, the Association of Basic-Level City Councils of Ukraine, and the Association of District and City Councils.

The adoption of the Laws of Ukraine "*On Local Self-Government in Ukraine*" on 21 May 1997 and "*On Local Government Associations*" on 16 April 2009 completed the process of establishing the legal framework for the activities of already existing national associations, including the Association of Ukrainian Cities and the Ukrainian Association of District and Regional Councils.

In addition, in 2009, at the initiative and upon the proposal of the then Prime Minister of Ukraine, Yulia Tymoshenko, the All-Ukrainian Association of Village and Settlement Councils was established. In 2019, it was renamed the All-Ukrainian Association of Communities.

During the implementation of the administrative-territorial reform and the establishment of amalgamated territorial communities, political leaders of these communities founded the All-Ukrainian Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities in 2016.

At present, four nationwide Local Government Associations operate in Ukraine:

1. Ukrainian Association of District and Regional Councils (*Українська асоціація районних та обласних рад, 1997*);
2. Association of Ukrainian Cities (*Асоціація міст України, 1992*);
3. All-Ukrainian Association of Communities (*Всеукраїнська асоціація громад, since 2019*), formerly the All-Ukrainian Association of Village and Settlement Councils (*Всеукраїнська асоціація сільських та селищних рад, 2009*);
4. All-Ukrainian Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities (*Всеукраїнська Асоціація об'єднаних територіальних громад, 2016*).

Alongside these organisations, there are also associations uniting mayors, local government officials, and municipal professionals, such as the Association of Mayors (*Асоціація мерів*), the Mayors' Club (*Клуб мерів*), the Ukrainian Municipal Club (*Український муніципальний клуб*), and so on. Their activities do not fall within the specific legal framework governing nationwide Local Government Associations. Instead, these organisations operate under the general political and legal framework applicable to civil society organisations.

This legal distinction creates a significant difference between associations based on individual membership and associations uniting local self-government authorities, particularly in terms of their public role, mandates, and institutional and legal capacities.

In practice, this means that associations based on collective membership and those based on individual membership have different institutional natures, even though they pursue similar objectives and operate within the same sphere.

Analysis of the Legislation Regulating the Activities of LGAs

For a long period, local government associations did not possess a clearly defined legal status.

Nationwide local government associations were established and operated on the basis of Article 15 of the Law of Ukraine "On Local Self-Government in Ukraine", which stipulated that local self-government authorities, for the purpose of more effectively exercising their powers and protecting the rights and interests of territorial communities, could unite in local government associations and their voluntary unions subject to registration in accordance with the Law of Ukraine "On State Registration of Legal Entities, Individual Entrepreneurs and Public Organisations". For almost a decade, this provision established only general requirements regarding the consolidation of local self-government authorities.

Further development of the legal foundations governing the organisation and activities of LGAs, as well as their relations with state authorities and local self-government bodies, was regulated at the legislative level only in 2009 through the adoption of the Law of Ukraine "On Local Government Associations".

This Law provides for the establishment of local and nationwide local government associations. Nationwide associations are defined as associations uniting more than half of local self-government authorities of the relevant territorial level, while an association with local status may be established by no fewer than three local self-government authorities.

It should be noted that the current Law does not establish a separate status for associations formed by more than three but fewer than half of local self-government authorities of the respective territorial level where the combined territorial basis of the member authorities extends beyond the local or regional level.

Village (*selo*), town (*selyshche*), city (*misto*), district-in-city, district (*raion*), and regional (*oblast*) councils may become members of associations. A special procedure applies to membership in nationwide associations. In particular, a local self-government authority may belong to only one nationwide association. In addition, local associations may join nationwide associations as collective members.

In this way, the legislator primarily restricts the principle of voluntary association formation and limits the typological diversity of the association system by effectively leading to their standardisation into general membership associations. At the same time, associations established according to socio-territorial criteria (such as associations of village councils, associations of city councils, associations of small towns, or associations of district councils) and socio-economic criteria (such as the Association of Mining Towns of Donbas, the League of Historic Cities, or associations of mountain areas) contribute to a more comprehensive representation and realisation of the interests of local self-government authorities.

Decisions to initiate the establishment of an association, join an existing association, or withdraw from it are adopted exclusively by local councils during plenary sessions.

At the same time, the Law of Ukraine "On Local Self-Government in Ukraine" identifies local self-government authorities as subjects entitled to establish voluntary associations. These authorities form a complex institutional system in which local councils occupy a central role. Their leading position as representative bodies of local self-government derives from the fact that they represent and implement local interests; adopt decisions on behalf of territorial communities; exercise local self-government powers in the interests of communities; consider and resolve a broad range of important issues not limited to a specific sector; define the principal directions of development of the local self-government system; and exercise oversight over other local self-government bodies and officials.

The leading role of local councils within the system of local self-government authorities ensures that their membership in associations provides the most comprehensive representation of the interests of territorial communities, while also enabling the involvement of other local self-government bodies and officials in the activities of associations.

In practice, local councils are primarily represented within associations by village, town, and city mayors. However, deputies (local MPs), council secretaries, and representatives of executive bodies also actively participate in association activities, frequently contributing to the work of specialised structures and committees established within associations.

Unfortunately, the current Law devotes insufficient attention to the rights, obligations, and liability of association members, as well as to the accountability of governing bodies and officials of associations in the exercise of their powers. These issues are generally regulated through the statutes of individual associations.

According to the associations' statutes, members typically have the right to participate in general meetings with voting rights; submit issues and draft documents for consideration; participate in the preparation and adoption of decisions; elect and be elected to governing bodies; receive information regarding the activities of associations; access original documents and obtain copies thereof; receive methodological, organisational, consultative, material, and other forms of assistance related to statutory activities; establish regional and local branches; and participate in official delegations of associations.

At the same time, association members are obliged to comply with statutory requirements and the principles and objectives of associations; actively participate in their work; implement decisions adopted by governing bodies; regularly inform associations about their activities and cooperation with other local self-government authorities; provide necessary support to governing bodies; facilitate the implementation of association decisions; and pay membership fees in a timely manner.

In cases of non-compliance with statutory obligations, measures of liability may be applied to association members, usually in the form of suspension or termination of membership. Procedures for the application of such measures should be clearly defined in association statutes.

At the same time, the system of relations between local councils and local government associations should be grounded in legislation that guarantees the autonomy of local councils and prevents undue interference by associations in matters of local significance.

The powers of local government associations include coordinating the efforts of local self-government bodies in protecting the rights and legitimate interests of territorial communities; addressing issues common to territorial communities; facilitating the exchange of experience; creating conditions for the more effective exercise of local self-government powers; assisting local governments in drafting legal acts and socio-economic and cultural development programmes; disseminating best practices in local governance; and protecting the interests of territorial communities, including upon requests from non-member local governments, in matters of public importance.

Most important include: participation in the advisory body on local self-government established under the Chairperson of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine; preparation of opinions on draft laws of Ukraine and other normative legal acts concerning local self-government;

submission of proposals to the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine for the draft Law on the State Budget of Ukraine regarding indicators of local budgets and intergovernmental fiscal transfers; participation in the development of draft national programmes for regional development, as well as projects and programmes for local and regional development; and protection of the local and regional interests of local and regional authorities during the adoption of decisions by state authorities concerning the socio-economic and cultural development of territories.

At the same time, legislation still does not guarantee the mandatory participation of association representatives in parliamentary committee meetings when draft legislation affecting local self-government, the rights and interests of territorial communities, or local and regional development is being considered.

There is also a legislative gap regarding the involvement of associations in consultations on draft acts prepared by ministries and other central executive authorities.

At the same time, the Rules of Procedure of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine provide for the participation of an authorised representative of nationwide LGAs in meetings of the Cabinet of Ministers with the right to an advisory vote when issues concerning the functioning of local self-government, the rights and interests of territorial communities, and local or regional development are being considered. Furthermore, during the preparation of draft acts of the Cabinet of Ministers concerning such matters, these drafts must be submitted to nationwide LGAs for comments and proposals.

Furthermore, legislation should expand the rights of associations to submit proposals to state authorities that are mandatory for consideration and to obtain information from state authorities necessary for fulfilling their statutory goals and functions.

Separate legislative regulation is also required to strengthen the role of local associations and regional branches of nationwide associations in consultations concerning draft regulatory acts of regional or local significance.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATIONS IN UKRAINE – LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Role and Functions of LGAs

As noted above, Local Government Associations (LGAs) across the world tend to perform broadly similar functions in supporting their members.

Advocacy – representing members in relations with central government institutions – is one of their core functions. This is undertaken at different stages of the legislative process, and in some cases begins as early as influencing government and/or parliament to initiate a reform process.

The right to consultation on matters concerning local government is enshrined in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, developed by the Council of Europe and signed by all its member states. The explanatory report to the Charter clarifies that consultations on matters of concern to several local authorities may be carried out through their associations. It is also assumed that formalised structures for consultation between the national level and associations should exist. In some cases, such as Poland, the level of institutionalisation is relatively high, with monthly meetings between LGAs and representatives of ministries responsible for initiatives affecting local and regional authorities. In Sweden, by contrast, the level of formalisation is lower, which has been criticised by the Council of Europe; however, there is a shared understanding between the state and SALAR regarding which issues should be addressed and what forms of consultation may be applied.

In any case, experience demonstrates that it is essential for LGAs to begin advocacy activities as early as possible and to combine both formal and informal consultation mechanisms, including the use of political networks within their respective parties.

It is crucial for an association's credibility as a meaningful partner in intergovernmental consultation processes that it is capable of genuinely representing its members through robust internal structures and procedures.

Another core function is supporting members in fulfilling and further developing their roles and responsibilities. While providing advisory services is one approach, an even more important and resource-efficient tool is the development of online guidance materials that assist members across different policy areas. LGAs also commonly provide training for local elected representatives and administrative staff. Some, typically more advanced, associations additionally develop interpretative guidance on how legislation should be applied within the municipal context.

Another area of activity is the development, often in cooperation with selected members, of new methods and approaches to municipal service delivery and internal administration. The compilation and presentation of relevant statistics in the form of key performance indicators is also a way of supporting members in contextualising their performance and promoting development. LGAs may also provide financial forecasts to support local budgeting processes.

Finally, LGAs play a natural role as platforms for interaction among their members.

The exchange of experience and good practice within sectoral committees, as well as through numerous thematic networks for officials and experts, has proven to be of significant importance. These fora also enable LGA experts and political leadership to gain valuable insights into diverse local realities, which is essential for formulating well-founded advocacy positions.

Democratic and Member-Based Governance

A core pillar of sustainable and effective Local Government Associations (LGAs) is the principle of democratic and member-based governance. This model not only ensures legitimacy and trust among members but also strengthens the association's credibility as a public actor. Drawing on Swedish, Polish, and broader European practice, this section presents methodological recommendations on how LGAs in Ukraine can adopt and institutionalise democratic governance in order to foster accountability, representation, and responsive leadership.

Compliance with Declared Values and Organisational Practice

The foundational legitimacy of any LGA rests on adherence to its declared values – such as transparency, inclusiveness, accountability, and responsiveness. These values must not remain declarative statements but must be consistently reflected in policies, procedures, and day-to-day operations. Drawing on the Swedish model, LGAs should embed these principles in their statutes, strategic documents, and codes of ethics, and ensure compliance through independent oversight mechanisms and regular reporting.

Governance Structure and Internal Management

A clear and coherent governance structure defines the relationship between the general membership, the association's governing bodies (Board, Council, General Assembly/Congress, committees), and the executive office. Roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined to avoid duplication and internal conflict. In the Association of Polish Cities, for example, responsibilities are distributed between the General Assembly, the governing board, and an executive directorate responsible for implementation.

Democratic electoral processes are fundamental to organisational vitality. Establishing term limits for elected representatives of the Association, as well as limits on the tenure of staff members, ensuring regular leadership rotation, and promoting the participation of young people alongside gender balance and diversity, contribute to sustainable generational renewal and balanced institutional development. Open, regular, and inclusive elections strengthen legitimacy and reinforce members' sense of ownership and belonging within the organisation.

Specialised committees (e.g. on finance, legislation, and international affairs) can significantly enhance the quality of internal deliberations by drawing on professional expertise and the active engagement of local leaders. Such bodies provide a platform for more in-depth and substantive discussions and help ensure that decisions are well-founded and representative of the membership as a whole.

Transparency in decision-making processes is essential. Meeting agendas, minutes, voting records, and financial documents should be published regularly and made openly accessible.

The Polish practice of ensuring openness of board meetings and publishing strategic decisions provides a valuable example of how transparency and trust within associations can be strengthened.

Democratic Decision-Making Processes

Democratic decision-making processes should ensure fair representation of all member municipalities, regardless of geographical location, size, or fiscal capacity. In European practice, such representativeness is commonly achieved through proportional voting systems, regular rotation of leadership positions, and balanced regional representation. For Ukraine, the establishment of clear criteria and mechanisms for equitable participation would help address disparities and strengthen cohesion among communities.

Strengthening participatory mechanisms requires the creation of institutionalised spaces for consultation and feedback. General assemblies, working groups, surveys, and regional forums ensure that all members are able to influence the priorities and strategic direction of the association. Digital democracy tools – as effectively implemented in Sweden – can further enhance engagement, particularly among remote or less-resourced municipalities.

Membership Engagement and Communication

Active member engagement and well-structured communication are fundamental preconditions for the effective functioning of an association. The active participation of communities not only strengthens organisational capacity but also improves the quality of collective positions and decision-making. To achieve this, LGAs should develop coherent and comprehensive communication strategies that ensure not only regular information-sharing regarding the organisation's activities, but also create genuine, institutionally embedded opportunities for members to influence agenda-setting and decision-making processes. This includes, in particular, the systematic organisation of consultations, open discussions and surveys, the operation of thematic working groups, and the direct involvement of municipalities in shaping consolidated positions within dialogue with government institutions and development partners. Regular newsletters, policy updates, interactive webinars, digital collaboration platforms, and modern feedback mechanisms should become permanent elements of such a strategy, ensuring transparency, trust, and high-quality communication within the association.

Knowledge exchange constitutes a core function of LGAs. The Polish and Swedish associations organise peer-learning activities, maintain repositories of good practice, and support benchmarking initiatives. Ukrainian LGAs may build on these experiences through digital knowledge platforms, study visits, and the development of thematic networks.

Regional chapters and structures of associations play a key role in coordination and interaction, ensuring grassroots engagement and the development of systematic feedback mechanisms. These structures facilitate decentralised cooperation, enable tailored responses to the specific needs of communities, and strengthen inter-municipal solidarity.

Ensuring Long-Term Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership requires long-term investment. LGAs should actively develop future leaders through training, mentoring, and exposure to national and international governance practices. Particular attention should be given to the inclusion of women, young people, and underrepresented groups.

Institutional independence constitutes a cornerstone of democratic governance. While cooperation with national authorities, donors, and private-sector actors is beneficial, Local Government Associations must preserve their autonomy. Appropriate legal safeguards, diversified funding sources, and transparent partnership frameworks are critical to preventing external pressure that could undermine internal democracy or distort the organisation's priorities.

Conclusion

Democratic, member-based governance is not merely a procedural requirement – it is the foundation of the legitimacy and effectiveness of Local Government Associations. By aligning with the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and drawing on best practices from Sweden, Poland, and other European countries, Ukrainian associations can strengthen their institutional capacity to become more resilient, transparent, and inclusive. Associations grounded in democratic legitimacy are better equipped to represent local interests, advocate effectively at national and international levels, and contribute to the long-term development of Ukraine's local self-government system.

Gender Equality

Gender Equality and the Activities of LGAs

Should Local Government Associations (LGAs) support communities in introducing gender-sensitive approaches? Experts of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), for example, would answer these questions unequivocally in the affirmative. Indeed, one of the three core components of SALAR's mission is "Rights, Participation, and Equality to Support Equitable Local Democracies".

Gender equality in Swedish local self-government is viewed from two perspectives. The first is the human rights perspective: ensuring gender equality means that, regardless of a person's sex, their rights are respected, protected, and fully realised. This is fundamentally a matter of social justice. If such issues are ignored, social tensions, conflict, and public dissatisfaction increase as people perceive discrimination and disregard for their dignity and needs. The second perspective concerns the effectiveness of governance. Gender equality creates opportunities for sustainable social and economic development by ensuring that every individual, regardless of sex, has the opportunity to develop, work, remain economically independent, and contribute to the development of the community. Consequently, the gender policy pursued by Sweden in general, and by SALAR in particular, has become one of the integral regulatory mechanisms of public life.

Several years of cooperation between one Ukrainian Local Government Association – the All-Ukrainian Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities – and SALAR led to the recognition of the need for gender integration within Ukrainian local self-government. As a result, the Association established a dedicated thematic platform on gender equality, which ultimately developed a separate institutional policy document – the Association's Gender Policy – to be followed by all member communities. Although it is still too early to speak of a sufficient level of gender sensitivity within Ukrainian local self-government as a direct result of this initiative, this achievement represents an important step in strengthening the institutional capacity of the Association and serves as a practical reference point for supporting communities in the implementation of democratic practices and gender-responsive initiatives.

What else can LGAs do to support gender integration at community level? First and foremost, they can assist communities in developing practical skills in gender mainstreaming and non-discrimination.

This may include, for example, issues such as the accessibility and quality of municipal services for different population groups, the responsibility of local employers to ensure equal opportunities for working women and men with family responsibilities, the prevention of and response to domestic violence, career guidance for children free from gender stereotypes, health protection programmes for women and men, cultural initiatives recognising the contributions of both women and men, and the promotion of equal sharing of family responsibilities between partners and parents.

All these areas of activity on the part of local self-government authorities demonstrate that local authorities genuinely care about their residents. In turn, this contributes to strengthening public trust and loyalty towards local government.

As an initial step, gender mainstreaming within local self-government can be implemented through four practical stages described below.

1. Assess whether gender equality is ensured in decision-making and governance processes. In particular, local governments should consider whether a proposed decision affects women
2. Collect all data disaggregated by sex. The collected information should then be analysed to identify differences in the situation of women and men.
3. Conduct gender impact assessments. Local authorities should evaluate the consequences of particular decisions for women and men, girls and boys.
4. Analyse progress towards gender equality objectives. This requires assessing how the activities of local self-government authorities contribute to the achievement of gender equality.

Such an approach can be applied to every programme implemented within a community and makes it possible to assess the extent to which local self-government policies take gender aspects into account and respond to the needs of different population groups.

European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life

For European municipalities, the principal guiding instrument for advancing gender equality at the local level is the *European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life*. Some Ukrainian communities that participated in European integration projects over the past decade also had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with this instrument and, on its basis, develop their own Equality Plans.

However, this experience coincided first with the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and therefore, in most cases, these initiatives did not become fully institutionalised.

At the same time, Ukraine's accelerated European integration process has brought this work back onto the agenda and renewed the relevance of these earlier efforts.

The experience of developing Equality Plans demonstrated that one of the greatest barriers to gender integration within Ukrainian communities remains entrenched gender stereotypes.

There is also a persistent tendency to underestimate the importance of ensuring equal opportunities and to perceive such issues as unrelated to the mandate of local self-government. Yet the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life – signed by nearly all municipalities in Sweden – clearly demonstrates that gender equality concerns all areas of local self-government competence and all services provided by municipalities: education, healthcare, social protection, childcare and care for dependants, culture and sport, construction and spatial planning, transport, economic development, environmental protection, public procurement, public participation, political participation, sustainable development, and others. Only through the full utilisation of the potential of both women and men can communities develop effectively. If existing gender inequalities remain unaddressed – including high mortality among working-age men and barriers limiting women’s participation in the labour market – communities may eventually face a situation in which there are simply insufficient human resources to sustain and develop them. Therefore, local self-government authorities should not focus exclusively on attracting investors as the sole perceived solution for community development but should also support both women and men in developing their talents and remove the barriers preventing them from doing so.

Today, Ukrainian communities have the opportunity to become signatories to the European Charter for *Equality of Women and Men in Local Life* (<https://gender.auc.org.ua/>) and move towards a level of gender integration that permeates every sphere of local self-government competence. This will make it possible to improve the quality of life of women and men in communities while taking into account the specific conditions and characteristics of each territory, since every community develops its own Equality Plan based on its capacities and priorities.

Gender-Responsive Budgeting

Issues of governance effectiveness through gender-sensitive approaches also extend to budget management. For public budget managers, responsibility for the equitable allocation of expenditures acquires practical significance through gender-responsive budgeting. Since January 2025, the Budget Code of Ukraine has included an obligation to take gender aspects into account within the programme-target method of public budget management. This approach requires continuous assessment – at every stage of the budget process – of whose interests are being served by budget expenditures, through the use of performance indicators reflecting specific groups of beneficiaries of budgetary decisions. It is expected that this approach will reduce cases of inefficient and unjustified expenditures, as well as situations in which public resources are distributed inequitably.

Gender-responsive budgeting also presupposes coordinated work among different structural units of local self-government authorities – both those responsible for planning and implementing policies and those engaged in budget calculations. It serves as a mechanism for ensuring that planned expenditures genuinely contribute to the achievement of intended objectives, namely positive changes in the situation of beneficiaries. Gender analysis, which constitutes an obligatory component of gender-responsive budgeting, also makes it possible to identify innovative solutions by addressing problems at the level of their root causes. For example, research has demonstrated that social support for low-income groups – among whom women constitute the majority – should include interventions aimed at safeguarding women's labour rights.

Accordingly, programmes should allocate funding specifically for such measures rather than merely continuing long-standing practices of direct financial assistance that do not fundamentally change a person's situation. In this context, gender-responsive budgeting becomes an opportunity to review existing low-effectiveness budgetary decisions.

Gender-responsive budgeting should be applied at all stages of the budget process:

1. Preparation and review of the Budget Declaration (local budget forecast) through updating sex-disaggregated statistical data; providing training on gender-responsive budgeting for staff members; conducting research to identify gender gaps in different spheres of community life; carrying out surveys assessing the quality of service provision; and conducting gender analysis of revenues and expenditures.
2. Preparation of draft budgets through ensuring a gender-balanced composition of working groups responsible for drafting local budget decisions; formulating gender-sensitive objectives, tasks, and performance indicators in budget requests; taking into account the needs of different groups of women and men when determining priority areas for budget expenditure; considering the results of gender analysis of budget programmes from previous years; including gender-responsive budget initiatives in draft budgets; obtaining proposals from different groups of women and men within the community; conducting public hearings and applying additional measures to encourage the active participation of women and men from different settlements within the community; ensuring public access to all budget-related information and reference materials in an accessible and visualised form; and indicating expenditures related to ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men in the explanatory note to the budget.
3. Review of draft budgets and adoption of local budget decisions through incorporating gender-sensitive objectives, tasks, and performance indicators into budget programme passports.
4. Budget implementation, including amendments to local budget decisions through monitoring and evaluation of budget expenditures using sex-disaggregated data, as well as monitoring budget programmes with regard to reducing gender gaps and eliminating gender discrimination.
5. Preparation and review of budget implementation reports and adoption of relevant decisions through preparing information on local budget implementation in quarterly and annual reports; indicating in the explanatory note the percentage of expenditures allocated to ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men; conducting and publishing the results of gender analysis of budget programmes; incorporating gender aspects into financial audits and evaluations of budget programme effectiveness; and presenting reports in an accessible and visualised format for community residents.

All the activities described at each stage make it possible to implement gender mainstreaming in practice.

These approaches should form part of the strategic recommendations for Local Government Associations, encompassing all types of programmes and policies that they support their members in implementing.

Advocacy

Advocacy by LGAs includes a wide range of activities, methods and approaches, as well as different purposes. The most typical example is negotiations with the central government regarding the size of state grants allocated to local governments. Equally important, however, is participation in shaping legislative and regulatory changes concerning municipal responsibilities, the services municipalities provide, and the overall operating conditions of the local government sector. For LGAs in EU Member States and candidate countries, advocacy also includes monitoring initiatives and proposals emerging from EU institutions that may affect municipalities and their functioning. Furthermore, local governments may have an interest in communicating directly with the broader public. In most of these situations, advocacy may take either a reactive or a proactive form.

Advocacy Strategies

In their advocacy efforts towards higher levels of government, LGAs generally have two principal approaches available to them. The first is to position themselves as constructive partners by demonstrating that they can contribute to proposals in ways that better achieve the intended objectives of a given initiative. The second is to mobilise opposition against a proposal, thereby strengthening criticism from opposition parties and increasing political pressure on the government. The latter approach is generally less likely to produce positive results and may place considerable strain on institutional relationships.

Reactive advocacy towards government proposals has the greatest chance of success when it takes place as early as possible, ideally before proposals move beyond preliminary ambitions or political intentions. Mature LGAs with broad expert capacity and strong political representation at national level usually develop extensive networks within ministries, parliament and political parties. Through these networks, they are often informed about upcoming initiatives at an early stage. However, even smaller associations can successfully establish useful contacts within ministries and parliamentary structures that help them receive early information and warnings.

In these relationships, the general principle is that "equals meet equals" – experts engage with experts and politicians engage with politicians, unless there are compelling reasons to depart from this practice.

The possibilities for gaining early access to legislative proposals differ depending on how legislation and secondary regulations are developed within a particular country. In systems where most initiatives originate within government ministries, LGAs can often establish working relationships that encourage ministries themselves to initiate consultations at an early stage.

In Sweden, for example, the government may publicly present legislative initiatives that require detailed investigation and preparatory analysis. Within such a system, the role of parliament in shaping legislative initiatives is relatively limited and generally confined to introducing only minor amendments to government bills.

In other countries, parliaments play a more active role in initiating and developing legislative proposals. When this is combined with weak party discipline, meaning that voting does not necessarily follow party lines, the advocacy role of LGAs becomes significantly more complex. In such contexts, there is also a greater risk that legislation will be of lower quality.

When pursuing the more constructive and supportive advocacy track, the strength of the LGA lies in its knowledge of local realities and its ability to provide relevant and credible evidence regarding how proposed changes are likely to function across different local contexts. In addition to general institutional knowledge, LGAs may use surveys, case studies, and other analytical tools to strengthen their arguments.

Proposed changes to municipal tasks or operating conditions often affect different types of municipalities in different ways. A proposal may suit larger municipalities while proving difficult to implement in smaller or rural communities. Other local conditions – including climate, demographic composition, economic structure or industrial profile – may also significantly influence implementation capacity.

Speaking with One Voice

The members of an LGA may have differing interests regarding a particular issue. In such circumstances, the ability of the association to achieve consensus and "speak with one voice" becomes critically important. Governments are likely to exploit divisions among local governments as justification for presenting their own proposal as the only feasible compromise. Conversely, when an LGA presents a consolidated and coherent position, this often facilitates dialogue with the government, as authorities understand that aligning with the LGA position may reduce criticism from the sector.

Developing a culture of consensus requires time and continuous effort. Decision-making processes must remain open, transparent and evidence-based. As a general principle, LGAs should publicly disclose all formal responses to government proposals in order to avoid ambiguity regarding their position. Political leaders within associations should also cultivate mutual trust and a shared understanding that while individual negotiations may result in compromises, long-term cooperation benefits all members.

Where several LGAs represent different categories of local governments, these associations should strive to coordinate and unify their positions whenever possible. Otherwise, governments may point to disagreements among associations as evidence that the government proposal represents the most balanced solution available. Although different associations may compete for members and influence, cooperation remains strategically beneficial. Experts – particularly legal experts – and political leaders should maintain regular communication with their counterparts in other associations. The exchange of perspectives may gradually evolve into common positions, especially during periods when the local government sector faces challenges that transcend institutional competition. This experience could prove to be extremely important.

In the Ukrainian context, achieving a genuine "single voice" among Local Government Associations is complicated by an additional factor – the asymmetry of political influence within the associations themselves. In practice, the positions of large cities often receive greater attention and are articulated more consistently, as their leaders typically possess significant political weight, public visibility, and direct channels of communication with central authorities. Under such conditions, there is a risk that the interests of small municipalities, rural communities, and settlement councils may be pushed into the background or diluted within an "average" compromise position. This is not necessarily the result of deliberate exclusion, but rather reflects objective inequalities in resources, expertise, and advocacy capacity.

For this reason, it is critically important for LGAs to establish internal balancing mechanisms that prevent the domination of particular groups of municipalities and ensure genuine representation of the full spectrum of local self-government – from metropolitan cities to the smallest communities. In the long term, only such internal fairness can make a "single voice" not only strong, but also legitimate.

Formal Structures for Intergovernmental Consultation

Countries that have ratified the European Charter of Local Self-Government are generally expected to establish formal mechanisms for intergovernmental consultation. These mechanisms may be based either on legislation or on institutional agreements.

One example of a legally regulated structure is the Polish the Joint Commission of the Government and Local Self-Government (*Komisja Wspólna Rządu i Samorządu Terytorialnego, KWRiST*), within which the government conducts regular monthly meetings with representatives of associations of local and regional authorities regarding matters affecting their members. In this context, the ambition to "speak with one voice" is particularly demanding, as five different associations must coordinate common positions.

As a rule, these associations meet in advance of official sessions to agree on shared approaches.

Less formal consultation systems may require governments to submit draft proposals to LGAs for written comments and/or consultation meetings. Although the Swedish consultation model is generally regarded by participating actors as effective, the Council of Europe criticised it during its monitoring of Sweden's compliance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government for lacking sufficient formalisation.

Costing and Financial Guarantees for the Proper Exercise of Powers

In accordance with the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, any additional or expanded mandatory local government responsibilities should be accompanied by corresponding financial resources.

The central question, however, concerns the amount of such compensation. Discussions between governments and LGAs regarding the costs of delegated responsibilities are likely to remain a permanent feature of intergovernmental relations.

Several principles may help LGAs facilitate these discussions.

Where responsibility for implementing a task is transferred directly from central government bodies to municipalities, the starting point for negotiations should be the current cost of implementation. It is essential that all overhead and administrative costs are included in the calculations. Governments may argue that municipalities will deliver services more efficiently, but in such cases the burden of proof should rest with the state. Any modifications to the content of the service or to the method of service delivery should also be reflected in the financial formula.

In practice, costing exercises most frequently concern changes to existing services rather than entirely new functions. Access to reliable statistical data – including population figures, current expenditure levels per capita and detailed cost structures, as well as other relevant statistics – is therefore essential for developing a defensible negotiating position.

A particularly important case concerns services that are currently provided voluntarily by certain municipalities but are proposed to become mandatory nationwide. Governments often calculate only the additional cost for municipalities that do not yet provide the service. LGAs, however, should insist on the principle that compensation should cover the full cost of implementation for all municipalities.

Within the Ukrainian legal order, these approaches have not only an international legal basis but also a constitutional foundation. Article 142 of the Constitution of Ukraine explicitly provides that expenditures incurred by local self-government authorities as a result of decisions adopted by state authorities shall be compensated by the state, and that the state participates in the formation of local budget revenues.

This principle is further developed in budget legislation, which prohibits the transfer of new or additional responsibilities to local self-government authorities without defining the corresponding sources of financial support.

Consequently, the issue of costing local government powers is not merely a matter of political expediency, but one of compliance with constitutional guarantees of local self-government. For this reason, LGAs, in their dialogue with government, should insist not only on the accuracy of costing methodologies, but also on the fundamental inadmissibility of decisions that formally expand municipal powers while, in practice, transferring financial burdens onto communities without providing adequate resources.

Structural Advocacy

Advocacy may also concern the broader institutional and legal conditions under which local governments and LGAs operate. This may include legal status, administrative procedures, oversight mechanisms, budgetary standards, access to credit, procurement rules, electoral systems or other structural conditions affecting local self-government.

Institutions proposing such reforms – whether governments or individual parliamentarians – often possess a more limited understanding of practical local governance realities than municipalities themselves. Many proposals arise from a desire to strengthen state oversight or control over the sector. Beyond the general principle of "if it is not broken, why fix it?", LGAs must therefore make substantial efforts to explain the likely practical consequences of proposed reforms.

Even where governments do not fully recognise or apply the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, LGAs should actively invoke and promote these principles in advocacy processes. Associations may also benefit from support and expertise provided by the Council of Europe through national offices or broader institutional mechanisms.

Consequently, LGAs should prioritise establishing and maintaining strong working relations with the Council of Europe and its relevant bodies. Particular importance should be attached to ensuring representation within national delegations to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, as well as building constructive relationships within those structures.

Comparative examples demonstrating how local governments are organised and regulated in other countries – especially countries with comparable governance systems or territorial structures – can also significantly strengthen advocacy efforts.

Proactive Advocacy

Although many of the principles and methods applied in reactive advocacy are equally relevant to proactive advocacy, the timeframes and strategic challenges involved in improving conditions for local self-government and for the broader system of multilevel governance are often different. First, LGAs should ensure that their efforts focus on issues which are both prioritised by members and realistically capable of achieving success. Secondly, considerable time and preparatory work may be required before governments recognise the need for change and agree to enter into consultations.

Once again, strong personal relationships often play a decisive role in opening opportunities for dialogue. Clear examples demonstrating how current arrangements hinder effective governance, combined with the ability to connect proposed reforms to ongoing public debates or pressing societal challenges, may help persuade government actors to engage in discussions.

Building Coalitions

Whenever possible, LGAs should seek to involve stakeholders capable of becoming advocacy partners. These may include civil society organisations as well as representatives of the private sector. Examples include parent associations in the field of education, business associations involved in local and regional economic development, organisations engaged in spatial planning and related permitting processes, as well as organisations working in the fields of culture and sport. Some coalitions may be established to address a specific advocacy issue, while others may evolve into long-term and institutionalised forms of cooperation.

Strategic Communication

Although different LGAs possess different levels of access to national media or resources for paid communication campaigns, all associations can use communication strategically in support of their advocacy objectives. As with all communication activities, effectiveness depends on understanding which audiences should be reached, what information should be communicated, and how messages can influence knowledge, attitudes and behaviour.

A well-resourced association such as SALAR in Sweden may invest in national communication campaigns. One example was the campaign "Sweden's Most Important Job", which sought to encourage young people to pursue careers in local and regional government while also strengthening the sense of purpose among existing employees.

All LGAs should strive to understand how relevant media institutions function and establish constructive relations with journalists and editors.

An important aspect of strategic communication is the ability to frame messages in ways that generate media interest and can be transformed into news reports, feature articles, radio broadcasts or television coverage supporting advocacy objectives.

International Advocacy

Within the European Union, a substantial proportion of EU legislation directly or indirectly affects local governments. At the same time, many local government activities and decisions are shaped by EU rules and policies. Consequently, LGAs must extend their advocacy efforts beyond the national level to include EU institutions and advisory bodies.

The most visible arena for such engagement is the European Committee of the Regions, an advisory body issuing opinions on EU legislative proposals. Member States are represented by delegations composed of local and regional politicians, while LGAs often play a decisive role in nominating delegates and supporting their work administratively.

However, by its nature, the Committee of the Regions becomes involved in the legislative process at a relatively late stage. For this reason, LGAs should develop the capacity to intervene much earlier in the process. These mechanisms are similar to those applied in domestic advocacy work. While maintaining a certain presence in Brussels is important, a significant share of the substantive work continues to take place at national level, where thematic experts should not only monitor domestic legislative developments but also remain informed about EU initiatives and intervene at the appropriate stage. The underlying principles and instruments remain the same: engage early, maintain effective professional contacts, and build alliances.

For LGAs in EU candidate countries, direct advocacy towards EU institutions may be less significant than ensuring that national governments adequately represent local and regional interests during accession negotiations and implementation of the EU acquis. Nevertheless, these associations should ensure strong representation within working groups and joint consultative committees established by the Committee of the Regions with candidate countries.

Finally, membership in regional and global organisations representing local governments enables LGAs to broaden perspectives, strengthen professional networks and enhance their capacity to represent members effectively at both national and international levels.

Financial Sustainability

The backbone of a Local Government Association's income must be the member fees. Financial independence is necessary to fully be able to be a strong advocate for the members.

But, for a newly formed association the challenges to show that members will get value for money are considerable. The local governments may also have very meagre budgets, where every extra expense is scrutinised. Thus, initial support from external donors may be necessary. Sometimes there might also be an interest from the central government to use the LGA as a tool to reach out to the local governments and thus a willingness to finance activities to strengthen their competence and capacity.

Such external funding may be acceptable as long as the activities financed by these grants are in line with the interest of the LGA and don't threaten to squeeze out activities that have higher priority. Actually, advanced LGAs like Swedish Salar receive considerable contributions from the central government precisely to implement projects and activities that are of common interest to central and local governments. Some activities, like the database for municipal key indicators, are even co-financed by the state and the association.

Members of the association should clearly understand which activities and services are financed through membership fees. This may be articulated through a "Promise to Members" and a membership fee policy. The "Promise to Members" should define the activities the association undertakes in the fields of advocacy and member support.

The membership fee policy should clearly specify which services – such as consultations provided by LGA experts or participation in events – are covered by membership fees, and which services – such as training programmes or advanced advisory support – require additional payment by members when used. The principles used for determining such fees should also be clearly defined. As a rule, participation in training sessions or conferences is charged at a level corresponding to the actual organisational costs, while specialised advisory services are usually priced closer to market rates.

While the income from such fees will increase the capacity of the LGA to provide services, it is unlikely and also questionable from the perspective of the members to expect that the LGA could generate a profit from its services. Hence, the basic functions must be financed by member fees. At the same time, it should be mentioned that some advanced LGAs have set up companies to produce some services to members and/or to manage the financial and fixed assets of the association. Such companies are often expected to produce a certain dividend to the LGA, which is seen as a return on the capital that has been invested in the company.

Principles for setting member fees

In most LGAs, membership fees are determined in one way or another according to the number of inhabitants in each member municipality. This may take the form of a fixed amount per resident or a differentiated system based on population categories, for example: up to 5,000; 5,001-10,000; 10,001-25,000, etc. In some cases, larger municipalities receive certain discounts, as they possess their own internal capacities – for example, qualified legal staff – and therefore rely less extensively on the services provided by the association.

There are also examples of LGAs where membership fees are linked to local budget revenues. Such an approach may be justified where per capita revenue differs significantly between municipalities and fiscal equalisation mechanisms remain weak.

Regardless of the model chosen, it is critically important that it be perceived as fair. The decision on the fee model should be adopted by the association's highest governing body, such as the congress or general assembly. The body preparing the proposal – usually the board or a dedicated committee – should strive to achieve the broadest possible consensus.

Non-paying members

The statutes and/or by-laws of the LGA should clearly define the consequences applicable to members that fail to pay membership fees. Do they have access to advisory services, training activities, events, and other forms of support?

Normally such municipalities lose their voting rights at the general assembly. However, could a representative from a non-paying member that have been elected to the board or a committee continue to participate and vote in that organ? And if the highest decision-making organ is a congress with delegates elected by a regional body, would delegates being mayors or local politicians from a non-paying member be able to participate?

These matters are further complicated in countries where the state exercises strict control over municipal spending and might hinder a member of an LGA to pay the member fees although the municipality wants to do so. Likewise, extreme situations like war or disasters may make it reasonable to relieve some members of the duty to pay its fees.

Whatever the case, the effects of non-payment should be foreseeable and perceived as just.

International Cooperation and European Integration

Cities as Pillars of European Reconciliation and Integration

Throughout European history, cooperation between cities has often paved the way for reconciliation where state-level diplomacy lagged behind.

From the post-war twinning of cities such as Coventry and Dresden to contemporary urban networks promoting sustainability, migrant inclusion, and smart mobility, local governments have played a pivotal role in shaping a citizen-centred Europe.

City-to-city or community-to-community partnerships, cross-border cooperation, and joint municipal initiatives have contributed to building trust between societies, preventing conflict, and promoting shared values such as democracy, transparency, and social cohesion. National and transnational local government associations (LGAs) have been instrumental in coordinating these efforts, disseminating good practices, and advocating for local needs at the European level.

Within local government associations, responsibility for international cooperation is usually assigned to one of the members of the LGA Board. Decisions regarding the strategic directions of cooperation are generally taken by the General Assembly or the Board of the association.

Today, amid war on the European continent and the urgent challenges of reconstruction and security, the role of municipalities is once again essential.

Ukrainian cities and communities, through their openness and dynamism, are becoming full participants in the European project.

Their engagement in European municipal networks is not merely a tool for local development – it is also a statement of shared values and commitment to democracy.

The responsibility of Ukrainian LGAs lies not only in providing administrative support to their members, but also in strategically positioning local governments as actors of European integration and contributors to international dialogue and peacebuilding.

Strengthening Partnerships with European Associations of Local and Regional Authorities

To foster a robust and forward-looking system of international cooperation, LGAs should prioritise strategic partnerships with their European counterparts through:

- participation in municipal twinning initiatives, which provide a proven platform for long-term cooperation in areas such as digital transformation, energy transition, youth policy, and inclusive governance;
- joint research and advocacy, particularly in the fields of decentralisation, recovery-oriented public services, and multilevel governance. Ukrainian associations should actively seek opportunities to co-develop policy papers and strategic positions together with European associations in order to ensure that the voice of Ukrainian municipalities is heard in Brussels and Strasbourg;
- membership in and cooperation with organisations such as the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and the Assembly of European Regions (AER), as well as active participation in policy innovation consortia, including inter-association task forces focused on resilience, sustainability, gender equality, and post-war reconstruction.

Promoting Access to European and International Programmes

Effective participation of local governments in EU programmes begins with strong coordination and support from national associations. Good practices from countries such as Poland and Lithuania demonstrate that associations can:

- facilitate participation in EU programmes such as *Horizon Europe*, *Interreg*, *Creative Europe*, and *Erasmus+* by providing training, technical support, and matchmaking between municipalities and European partners;
- encourage and co-finance the membership of local governments in leading European municipal networks – such as *Eurocities*, *Intercultural Cities*, *EUniverCities*, and *XARXA FP* – which provide access not only to EU funding opportunities but also to policy influence;
- act as national coordinators or contact points representing clusters of municipalities within international consortia and helping to ensure balanced geographical representation, particularly for underrepresented regions.

Supporting Cross-border Cooperation and Mobility Programmes

Municipal cross-border and transnational initiatives are among the most dynamic instruments for strengthening European cohesion. These may include:

- promoting local government good practices at the international level;
- implementing joint regional development projects in areas such as infrastructure, climate resilience, public health, and economic recovery;
- organising peer-learning activities and exchange visits that support horizontal learning among local officials, including youth councils and civil servants;
- participation in European forums – such as the European Week of Regions and Cities or CEMR congresses – which helps local leaders align their activities with EU strategic priorities and ensure that local perspectives are reflected in policy discussions.

International cooperation is no longer an optional area of municipal activity – it has become essential. For Ukrainian cities and communities, it represents both a pathway to accelerated development and a route towards lasting peace and integration into the European community. Local government associations must therefore act as facilitators, connectors, and advocates by creating the institutional infrastructure for long-term engagement, strengthening the capacity for meaningful partnerships, and ensuring that the voice of Ukrainian local self-government is heard across Europe.

Digitalisation and Innovation in LGAs

Ukraine is one of the leading countries in Europe in the field of digital public services and e-governance. Platforms such as Diia, the high level of digital literacy among the population, and the responsiveness of local governments in crisis situations – including under martial law – place Ukrainian municipalities ahead of many of their European counterparts. For Local Government Associations (LGAs), this strong ICT foundation creates both a unique opportunity and a significant responsibility to establish new standards in digital association management.

Coordinated Digital Action for Crisis Resilience and Local Empowerment

The early stages of Russia's full-scale invasion demonstrated the critical importance of fast, secure, and coordinated communication among local governments. In emergency situations, including the abduction of mayors and heads of communities (hromadas), associations must be able to share verified information securely, issue joint statements, and support members through rapid coordination mechanisms.

This requires not only real-time communication tools (e.g. Signal, Mattermost), but also the integration of alert systems, protected internal databases, and encrypted decision-making platforms. LGAs should therefore treat cybersecurity and data protection as strategic priorities.

ICT Tools for Inclusive Governance, Transparency, and Representation

Associations – particularly those representing municipalities at the local level – must act as facilitators of dialogue and consensus-building. Digital consultation tools, such as online voting systems, thematic surveys, participatory policy-design platforms, and structured online forums, enable remote communities to contribute to the development of common positions. These instruments are particularly important for representing the interests of Ukrainian local governments in Kyiv and Brussels.

Transparency is equally important. Associations should maintain clear and user-friendly websites through which members and the public can access statutes and governance structures, lists of member municipalities, strategic documents and policy positions, budgetary and project reports, as well as information on upcoming meetings and events.

At the same time, secure intranet systems accessible exclusively to members, regional branches, and association staff should provide access to internal materials and member-only services.

Digital communication channels – including email newsletters, interactive member portals, and verified social media accounts – should ensure accessible and two-way communication with all members.

Investing in Innovation, Security, and Institutional Capacity

Associations should continue to build on their digital advantages by adopting cloud-based member management and CRM systems, developing e-learning platforms for municipal staff, experimenting with AI-assisted knowledge-management tools, and participating in EU-funded digital transformation programmes available to Ukraine (e.g. Digital Europe, Horizon Europe).

Where resources permit, associations may also serve as technology enablers for their members by piloting innovative solutions that can later be scaled across wider municipal networks. Investments in ICT should be accompanied by investments in human capacity-building, including digital literacy, cybersecurity training, and open governance practices.

Ukraine's digital readiness constitutes a significant asset that can enable local government associations to become more agile, secure, transparent, and responsive.

With appropriate tools and strategies, associations can support their members not only in the delivery of everyday services, but also in safeguarding democracy, strengthening European partnerships, and contributing to Ukraine's reconstruction from the local level upwards.

Cooperation Between LGAs and Models of Cooperation with State Administrations

In European countries, strong cooperation between Local Government Associations (LGAs) – both among themselves and with national authorities – has proven essential for effective decentralisation, policy influence, and coordination during periods of crisis.

1. Cooperation Between Local Government Associations

In many European countries, several associations represent different levels or categories of local government, such as cities, counties, or rural municipalities. Even where these associations pursue different priorities, they frequently cooperate in order to formulate joint positions and strengthen their influence on national policymaking.

In Poland, the Joint Commission of the Government and Local Self-Government was established by law and includes representatives of several associations, including the Association of Polish Cities, the Association of Polish Counties, and the Association of Rural Municipalities (Communities). These organisations jointly nominate representatives, coordinate positions, and participate in structured dialogue with central authorities on legislative and financial matters. **In France**, major associations such as the Association of French Mayors (Association des Maires de France, AMF), the Assembly of French Departments (Assemblée des Départements de France, ADF), and the Association of French Regions (Régions de France) regularly coordinate their positions and issue joint statements concerning national reforms. **In Germany**, associations representing cities, counties, and municipalities cooperate on a regular basis and maintain structured dialogue with the federal government.

2. Cooperation with State Administration

"Local authorities shall be consulted, insofar as possible, in due time and in an appropriate way in the planning and decision-making processes for all matters which concern them directly."

– Article 4.6, European Charter of Local Self-Government

Constructive cooperation with state institutions strengthens both the influence and the credibility of Local Government Associations. In Poland, for example, the institutionalised dialogue mechanism of the Joint Commission of the Government and Local Self-Government serves as a formal platform for negotiating and shaping national policies affecting local governments. In Sweden, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) operates as a single unified body representing all municipalities and regions.

Countries such as Finland and Germany also consult Local Government Associations prior to the introduction of legislation affecting municipalities or regions. In many European states, LGAs participate jointly with ministries in the development of national strategies in areas such as climate policy, education, infrastructure, and digital transformation.

Associations frequently nominate experts to advisory councils and steering committees, thereby ensuring that local perspectives are reflected in policy planning and implementation. Moreover, state institutions often rely on LGAs as partners in EU-funded reforms and decentralisation initiatives. In such cases, associations may act as implementers, trainers, or intermediaries, helping to bridge the gap between national policymaking and practical implementation at the local level.

In 2005, French local government associations established a joint office in Brussels – La Maison européenne des Pouvoirs Locaux Français (MEPLF) – to coordinate their activities at the EU level. Founded by major associations including AMF, ADF, Régions de France, France urbaine, and others, the initiative aims to represent French local governments before EU institutions, monitor relevant EU policies, and coordinate common positions and initiatives.

Ukrainian Local Government Associations should consider establishing formal or informal national coordination mechanisms in order to align their efforts and present a stronger collective voice on key reforms, while recognising that differences of position may remain in certain areas. They should also seek to establish regular consultation mechanisms with state institutions to ensure participation in legislative processes and the co-development of national policies.

Associations may further strengthen their role by nominating experts to governmental advisory bodies and working groups, thereby ensuring that local perspectives are adequately reflected in national decision-making processes. To support European integration, Ukrainian LGAs may also consider strengthening joint engagement in European municipal networks and exploring the possibility of shared representation in Brussels. Enhanced cooperation of this kind can increase their influence, institutional effectiveness, and capacity to advocate for local self-government.

PHASES OF SUPPORT FOR DECENTRALISATION REFORM, LOCAL GOVERNMENT, AND LGAS WITHIN THE DSP AND POLARIS PROGRAMMES

Since the establishment of the Eastern Partnership in 2009, Sweden has been one of the most active European supporters of reforms in Ukraine, particularly in the areas of decentralisation, local governance, and municipal self-government. Sweden's engagement deepened significantly following the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, when Ukraine launched comprehensive decentralisation reforms aimed at transferring powers, responsibilities, and resources from central government to local governments.

In this context, Sweden – through the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and its international branch, SALAR International – launched a long-term programme to support local self-government reform in Ukraine. The Decentralisation Support Project (DSP), implemented in two phases between 2014 and 2024, strengthened national policy institutions, supported key ministries (including those responsible for communities and territorial development, finance, and education), and contributed to building the capacity of newly established amalgamated territorial communities and the association representing them – the All-Ukrainian Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities (AATC). Throughout both phases, DSP contributed to the implementation of decentralisation reform, strengthening local governance, and promoting democratic and administrative practices at the municipal level.

Alongside the DSP programme, Sweden also implemented the PROSTO project: Support to Services Accessibility in Ukraine (2020-2023), which complemented decentralisation reform by focusing on the quality and accessibility of administrative public services. The PROSTO project strengthened the capacity of municipalities to provide user-oriented services, supported the development and functioning of Administrative Service Centres (ASCs), and assisted local governments in maintaining service provision during wartime conditions.

Recognising the new realities created by Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Sweden subsequently launched the Polaris Programme: Supporting Multilevel Governance in Ukraine (2024-2028). The programme is funded by the Government of Sweden through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and implemented by SALAR International. Its objective is to respond to wartime and post-war needs by strengthening local self-government, enhancing the capacity of communities (hromadas) to deliver public services and take an active role in the recovery and reconstruction processes, in line with EU accession requirements.

Through the Polaris Programme, Sweden reaffirms its long-term commitment to supporting local democracy and decentralisation in Ukraine. The programme's thematic areas – including education, fiscal decentralisation, support of Local Government Associations, support of Administrative Service Centres, locally led recovery, and international municipal cooperation – provide a broad and practical framework for strengthening the system of multilevel governance in Ukraine and bringing local government closer to EU standards.

The launch of the **Decentralisation Support Project (DSP)** represented a logical continuation of Sweden's earlier efforts to support democracy and European integration in Ukraine. One of the key questions facing the programme leadership was how to influence decentralisation processes and strengthen democratic mechanisms not only at the municipal level, but also at the level of the state and in the relationship between local governments and central government.

In the mid-2010s, three nationwide local government associations operated in Ukraine. These organisations had been established in the early 2000s within a very different political context – as elements of a highly centralised state model in which local self-government bodies (except for the largest cities) functioned largely as extensions of state administration.

A turning point for more targeted intervention came with the amalgamation of communities in 2015, accompanied by the transfer of powers and fiscal decentralisation. This opened the way for a genuine transformation of Ukrainian local units – from territorial subdivisions of the state administration into authentic self-governing authorities functioning according to European principles.

A key development was the establishment in November 2016 of a new organisation – the Association of Local Self-Government Bodies "Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities" (AATC) – founded by newly amalgamated communities. Its founders emphasised that the existing associations at that time did not adequately represent the interests of amalgamated communities and did not operate in the manner expected by the new municipalities. DSP began cooperation with AATC at a very early stage, when the Association had fewer than forty members.

The objective of DSP was to strengthen the internal governance of AATC, enhance the role of its political leadership, and ensure the democratic and member-based character of the organisation. The first joint activity consisted of a series of workshops during which the Association's leadership, supported by programme experts, developed a development strategy through to 2022. Among other things, this strategy defined the Association's mission and vision, core principles, foundations of legitimacy, operational principles, and key directions for future development.

The programme provided methodological support for the preparation of the strategy without interfering in its substantive content. The document was developed by the political leaders of the Association rather than by administrative staff or external consultants. A key underlying assumption was that the values declared by the Association should correspond to its organisational structure and day-to-day operational practices. The strategic document subsequently became the basis for defining standards and directions of cooperation for the following years.

Support to Local Government Associations later became a formalised component of the DSP project and subsequently of the Polaris Programme. Its purpose was to strengthen AATC as an autonomous, independent, member-based organisation. The format of cooperation was jointly agreed during annual in-depth interviews with members of the Association's Board designated by the Chairperson. These interviews focused on the overall situation in Ukraine, the condition of local self-government, and the internal development of the Association itself. On this basis, summary reports were prepared for AATC and SALAR International, and activities for the following year were planned accordingly.

Support was not provided in the form of unconditional institutional grants. Instead, it was implemented through substantive cooperation combined with the financing or co-financing of specific activities and expert positions.

From 2020 onwards, joint annual work plans were agreed. Activities were continuously adjusted in response both to the development of the Association and to the rapidly changing circumstances in the country, including the COVID-19 pandemic and, subsequently, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

During the first years, cooperation focused on two key areas outlined below:

Promoting Improved Democratic Procedures within the Association

Experts supported the alignment of the AATC and organisational structure with the standards and principles defined in its development strategy. Clear responsibility for specific areas of work was assigned to each member of the Board. The Association also established thematic platforms chaired by Board members and supported by dedicated staff experts.

In accordance with the principle of legitimacy – namely, the genuine representation of the interests of all members – and taking into account that most communities were small or geographically remote, an electronic survey system was introduced. This instrument became a key tool for the prompt collection of members' views, verification of positions, and development of consolidated approaches to current reform-related issues.

The project also supported the introduction of high standards of procedural governance, including clear rules for meetings of the Board, Council and Congress, as well as the obligation to publish the statute, the composition of governing bodies and AATC meeting minutes.

These practices, which had previously been relatively uncommon in Ukraine, gradually became part of the Association's everyday institutional culture.

Another important principle was that the external representation of the Association should primarily be carried out by elected members of the Board rather than by administrative staff. Project experts regularly participated in meetings of the Association's governing bodies, supported the improvement of internal procedures, provided consultations ahead of key events and prepared follow-up comments and recommendations afterwards.

Strengthening the Association's Office and Operational Capacity

The DSP project strengthened the organisational capacity of the central office by financing or co-financing thematic experts in line with both the Association's priorities and Sweden's donor priorities (for example, an expert supporting the "Gender Equality" Platform).

The Association's rapid growth – including the significant expansion of membership and its official recognition in 2019 as a nationwide local government association – confirmed the effectiveness of this democratic organisational model. Other organisations increasingly began to observe and use the Association's practices as a point of reference.

In 2019, new challenges emerged. On the one hand, the AATC was rapidly increasing its membership; on the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic began. During this period, the programme focused on expanding remote communication and cooperation tools, helping both the Association and its members to use ICT solutions effectively under pandemic conditions.

At the same time, the programme supported communities in exchanging knowledge related to the COVID-19 response, understanding the legal framework governing local self-government during the pandemic, disseminating good practices, and organising online meetings and training activities.

The rapid increase in membership also created the need to strengthen the Association's regional presence. In response, the programme supported the development of regional branches of the AATC – initially through international exchange of experience and the organisation of "regional weeks", during which representatives of the Association's leadership, experts and international partners participated directly in supporting regional activities, both online and offline.

As a result of workshops and consultations, standards for regional operations were developed, and the programme later provided targeted support to a number of the Association's regional coordinators.

Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 once again forced the programme to adapt to entirely new conditions. Already during the first weeks, it became evident that the reformed communities were playing a critically important role in the defence of the country. Support activities included public information and advocacy efforts (including campaigns related to abducted mayors), assistance to frontline communities, support for local governments and residents, and the establishment of the thematic platform "Temporarily Occupied and De-Occupied Communities".

In response to new political and security challenges, the AATC also sought expert support in the areas of crisis management and resilience-building. An important component of the programme was a series of study visits to Sweden, which gave Ukrainian local leaders the opportunity to observe in practice how strong, influential and democratic LGAs function.

Influence on Other LGAs and the Transition to the Polaris Programme

The success of the AATC and the cooperation model developed within the DSP project created the foundation for expanding this approach further. Within the framework of the new Polaris Programme, partnership was offered to all four nationwide local government associations in Ukraine, and two of them joined under jointly agreed conditions. The results of in-depth interviews with political leaders formed the basis for planning joint activities, and since 2024 the programme has been cooperating with the Association of Amalgamated Territorial Communities (AATC), the All-Ukrainian Association of Communities (AUAC or VAG) and the Ukrainian Association of District and Regional Councils (UADRC). An important component of this cooperation became inter-association political dialogue aimed at developing coordinated positions on draft legislation, the further implementation of decentralisation reform, European integration and international activities. Within this framework, representatives of the three associations formed joint delegations for the first time to participate in major international events, including the European Week of Regions and Cities and the Ukraine Recovery Conference.

The programme continues to provide direct support to the AATC, while thematic experts engaged within the Association – including experts on "Legislation for Communities", "Local Budgets and Finance", and "Gender Equality" – have also begun providing expert support to other associations.

Polaris initiated inter-association political dialogue and organised round tables on decentralisation reform, European integration, international cooperation, and draft legislation affecting local governments and their associations.

Representatives of the three participating associations jointly took part in key international events, including the **European Week of Regions and Cities and the Ukraine Recovery Conference**.

The programme continues to provide direct support to the AATC and maintains support for its regional branches, contributing to the strengthening of their institutional capacity and their day-to-day work with member communities.

A new element introduced by the **Polaris** programme was the recognition of the role of regional associations and their involvement in programme activities. These organisations focus primarily on addressing local issues and cooperating with regional authorities. Previously, international partners had not engaged with such organisations on a systematic basis. For the first time, the programme organised a forum of regional associations and Training of Trainers (ToT) sessions for their leaders, laying the groundwork for more structured and long-term cooperation at the regional level.

Lessons Learnt from the DSP and Polaris Programmes for the Development of Local Government Associations in Ukraine

The experience of the DSP and Polaris programmes demonstrates that decentralisation reform – similarly to the Polish experience – can become one of the key drivers of the long-term strengthening of democracy in Ukraine. Support for local government associations achieves the best results when it is based on respect for the autonomy of partners and aimed at strengthening their capacity to act and make decisions independently. At the same time, it is critically important to consistently emphasise the importance of an organisational culture built on the principles of transparency, democracy and accountability.

One of the foundations of effective cooperation was the joint planning of activities with partners through in-depth interviews, consultations and open discussions, combined with flexibility and readiness to adapt activities to emerging needs. Particular attention was paid to ensuring that everyday practices, organisational structures and internal culture corresponded to the values and strategic objectives declared by the associations.

Another key element was the continuous adaptation of activities in response to dynamic changes – both within Ukraine and in the international environment, as well as within the associations themselves.

Finally, one of the strongest assets of the DSP and Polaris programmes was their team of experts – experienced practitioners with strong democratic credentials, direct experience of working within local self-government systems, establishing and managing democratic organisations (including under crisis conditions), and long-standing involvement in international cooperation. It was precisely this combination of practical experience and expert knowledge that made it possible to design and implement activities that were realistic, adapted to local needs and genuinely effective.

EXTRACTS FROM THE 2022 STRATEGY OF THE ALL-UKRAINIAN ASSOCIATION OF AMALGAMATED TERRITORIAL COMMUNITIES (AATC)

Mission of the Association

The Association actively contributes to the establishment and development of amalgamated territorial communities (ATCs) as the foundation of a coherent new system of strong and effective local self-government in Ukraine.

Principles of Association

- The Association was established on **the initiative of communities**, by communities themselves and **in the interests of communities**.
- The Association is **a union of equals**.
- It offers its members **a new model of relations** based on mutual support, cooperation and synergy instead of competition.
- The Association is **non-partisan, but not apolitical**: it is independent from political parties while pursuing its own proactive policy based on the interests of the new Ukrainian local self-government within the broader context of the national interests of the Ukrainian state.
- The Association implements an **effective governance system and mechanisms for mandatory rotation** of leadership and governing bodies.

Principles of Activity

- The **Association's agenda** is shaped by its members.
- The objectives and directions of activity are based on the **needs and challenges of members**.
- Identifying these needs is a **priority task**.
- The Association's position is formed as a **coordinated position of its members**.
- In order to achieve consensus, the Association mobilises **collective knowledge and experience**, encourages **joint action** and creates instruments for **effective teamwork and horizontal cooperation**.
- The Association actively operates **at national, regional and local levels**, advocating for and defending the interests of communities by influencing all relevant processes affecting them.

Foundations of Legitimacy

The legitimacy of the Association is grounded in the firm principles of voluntary membership and common interests, patriotism and mutual trust, shared experience of change, and transparency and democratic activity carried out for communities and on behalf of communities.

Principles of Organisational Development

- **Democratic procedures in:**
 - the election of governing bodies (competition of candidate programmes, secret ballot, fair regional representation);
 - the development of the Association's positions (equal access and representation).
- **Mandatory rotation** of leadership and the full composition of governing bodies.
- **Collegial decision-making** on key issues.
- **Maximum involvement of members** in decision-making and in shaping the Association's positions.

Key Development Areas

- representation and advocacy of the interests of ATCs;
- support for the balanced development of ATCs;
- strengthening the institutional capacity of the Association.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of the DSP and Polaris programmes confirms that support for Ukrainian local government associations (LGAs) is most effective when it is based on genuine partnership, political dialogue with elected leaders, and deep respect for the autonomy of associations. Strengthening local democracy in Ukraine requires not only technical instruments, but also trust, integrity, consistent ethical standards and the long-term engagement of experienced practitioner-experts.

1. Anchor all support in partnership and political leadership

The most important factor behind sustainable institutional development was systematic cooperation with the political leadership of LGAs. Annual in-depth interviews, consultations and jointly agreed work plans ensured that priorities reflected the real needs of communities rather than donor assumptions. This partnership model should remain a fundamental principle: no decisions concerning associations should be taken without prior agreement with their elected leadership.

2. Strengthen democratic, transparent and member-based governance

LGAs should continue to develop democratic procedures that guarantee legitimacy: rotation of leadership, transparent decision-making, open communication with members, and a clear separation between political governing bodies and executive administration. Digital consultation tools – widely applied within the DSP and Polaris programmes – should remain a standard instrument for developing collective positions across all regions.

3. Strengthen institutional capacity through professional expertise and ethical standards

Institutional development depends on competent and respected experts. The success of the DSP and Polaris programmes was made possible through the involvement of practitioners with real local government experience, crisis management skills and strong democratic credibility. Continued emphasis on professional integrity, the avoidance of conflicts of interest and adherence to clear ethical standards should remain central to all capacity-building activities.

4. Ensure flexibility and responsiveness to changing national circumstances

Decentralisation reform in Ukraine developed under extraordinary circumstances – including the COVID-19 pandemic, political change and full-scale war. The ability of LGAs and the Polaris programme to adapt rapidly proved decisive. Future support should preserve this flexibility by allowing for the prompt adjustment of plans, responses to urgent needs and the maintenance of open channels for strategic dialogue with the associations' leadership.

5. Strengthen coordinated advocacy and inter-association cooperation

When LGAs act jointly, their influence increases significantly. The inter-association round tables initiated within Polaris should therefore be further institutionalised and expanded in order to develop common positions on decentralisation legislation, European integration, public finance and the distribution of powers.

Stronger coordination will reduce fragmentation, strengthen the political weight of local self-government and ensure that the sector speaks as a unified strategic partner in national reform processes.

6. Expand regional engagement and mutual learning

Regional branches and regional associations are essential for linking national advocacy with local realities. Further development of regional coordinators, regional forums and study visits – both within Ukraine and internationally – will support knowledge exchange, solidarity between communities and ensure that frontline and depopulated territories are properly represented and heard.

7. Strengthen resilience, crisis preparedness and community-led recovery

The war has highlighted the indispensable role of communities in national defence, the provision of essential services and humanitarian response. LGAs should develop permanent mechanisms for crisis communication, mutual assistance and professional training concerning emergency powers and crisis governance. Associations should perform a stabilising role by supporting their members before, during and after crises.

8. Support Ukraine's European integration through structured involvement of LGAs

Up to 80 per cent of the EU acquis is implemented at local level. Consequently, LGAs should be systematically involved in European integration processes, providing members with methodological support, training and platforms for cooperation with European municipal associations. International partnerships will help integrate European standards into everyday municipal practice.

9. Ensure long-term financial sustainability and independence

Stable, transparent and diversified funding is a prerequisite for institutional autonomy. Membership fees should remain the foundation of independence, complemented by targeted project-based support. Clear financial procedures, transparent reporting and ethical resource management strengthen trust and protect associations from political pressure.

Through these steps, Ukrainian local government associations can play a decisive role in shaping a democratic post-war state, supporting a return to the reform agenda, accelerating Ukraine's European integration and ensuring that local self-government retains a central place in Ukraine's future within the European Union.

10. Promote international support based on solidarity rather than dependency

A key lesson from the DSP and Polaris programmes is that international support is most effective when it strengthens – rather than replaces – local capacity. Support should be understood as solidarity grounded in mutual respect, long-term partnership and shared democratic values, rather than as directive instruction or donor conditionality. The objective of cooperation should remain the empowerment of Ukrainian associations to act independently, confidently and sustainably.

AYDER SEITOSMANOV (1964-2025)

Ayder Seitosmanov was born on 7 December 1964 in exile, in the city of Jizzakh in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, to Seit Yakub Seitosmanov and Esira Kurt-Umerova, who, together with the entire Crimean Tatar (*qırımtatarlar*) people, had been deported from Crimea on 18 May 1944. In 1987, he graduated from the Tashkent Institute of Telecommunications, earning a degree in engineering.

In 1991, Ayder returned to his homeland. Like thousands of Crimean Tatars returning from exile, he began rebuilding life from the very beginning, laying the foundations of his family home on an open field that would later become the settlement of Ismail Bey near Yevpatoria. At the same time, he became actively involved in the national revival of the Crimean Tatar people, establishing the civic organisation *Yashlyk (Yaşlık) Cultural Centre*, which brought together Crimean Tatar youth.



In 1995-1996, Ayder served as Deputy Director of the Ismail bey Gasprinsky (Gaspirali) Crimean Tatar Republican Library. From 1996 onwards, he was one of the founders and Director of the civic organisation Crimean Tatar Initiative Foundation, which until 2014 implemented educational, cultural and information programmes aimed at strengthening civil society in Crimea. Ayder devoted particular attention to supporting schools with Crimean Tatar-language instruction, whose revival became one of the defining achievements of the 1990s and 2000s.

Between 2004 and 2014, he worked as a leading expert for the United Nations Development Programme Representation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Through the Crimea Integration and Development Programme, this work supported the development of local self-government, economic initiatives and civic participation. During this period, Ayder also completed studies at the National Academy for Public Administration under the President of Ukraine. He was among the first experts in Ukraine consistently to emphasise the importance of grassroots civic initiatives, seeing them as a vital resource for the development of communities and the democratic transformation of the state as a whole.

For many years, Ayder Seitosmanov served as an elected delegate of the Kurultai of the Crimean Tatar People and was a member of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People. Following Russia's occupation of Crimea, he and his family were forced to leave the peninsula and relocate to mainland Ukraine. There, Ayder continued his public service as an expert of the Swedish-Ukrainian Decentralisation Support Project (DSP), implemented by SALAR International.

He also cooperated with United Nations Development Programme, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the International Renaissance Foundation, making a profound contribution to decentralisation reform, local democracy, multi-level governance and the strengthening of local government associations in Ukraine.

Since 1996, Ayder had been a certified trainer, an experienced facilitator and a mentor to several generations of civic activists and community leaders. His professional background combined engineering education, a Master's degree in Public Administration and postgraduate studies in political science. He authored more than 35 publications devoted to social cohesion, the rule of law,

Ayder possessed a rare gift for connecting with people, together with an exceptionally broad outlook and deep knowledge. He was distinguished by sincerity, integrity, tireless dedication and profound personal dignity. The serious illness he courageously fought during the final years of his life only strengthened his determination to continue serving people and communities. Until the very end, he remained active, maintaining close ties with the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People and civic organisations, while continuing to support important public initiatives.

Ayder Seitosmanov passed away on 6 December 2025 in Ghent (Belgium). He is survived by his wife Zarema, his sons Timur and Remzi, his daughters Elvina and Ulviye, his sister Diliara, and by countless friends, colleagues and companions in Ukraine, Crimea and far beyond. His life remains a testament to dignity, democratic values, service to communities and unwavering devotion to his people.

AUTHORS

Ayder Seitosmanov

Ukrainian expert in governance and decentralisation, specialising in local democracy, community development and strengthening the capacity of local government associations.

A certified trainer since 1996, he worked extensively with United Nations Development Programme, SALAR International, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the International Renaissance Foundation on decentralisation reform, good governance, multi-level cooperation and civic participation. Earlier in his career, he spent nine years managing projects within a major multi-donor UNDP programme in Crimea and held a number of important civic leadership positions, including membership of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People and leadership of the civic organisation Crimean Initiatives.

His professional background included engineering education, a Master's degree in Public Administration and postgraduate studies in political science. He was the author of more than 35 publications devoted to social cohesion, the rule of law, participatory planning and local economic development.

Krzysztof Stanowski

International expert on the development of local government associations; Director of the Centre for International Cooperation. Former activist of the underground Solidarity movement and political prisoner; co-founder of leading Polish civil society organisations, including the Education for Democracy Foundation and the Grupa Zagranica.

Experienced trainer with extensive work across Eastern Europe and Central Asia; former Deputy Minister of National Education of Poland and former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland; former President of the Solidarity Fund PL.

Co-organiser of Polish support for the Revolution of Dignity and co-founder of major civic initiatives supporting Ukraine. Since 2022, he has been a member of the Council of Europe Expert Committee on Intercultural Inclusion of Migrants.

Yuliia Savelieva

Gender expert within the Polaris Programme; expert and trainer in gender mainstreaming; Candidate of Philosophical Sciences (PhD equivalent). Civic activist and former lecturer at Sumy State University. Project manager and trainer for gender-oriented initiatives supported by the European Union, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Representation in Ukraine, the National Democratic Institute, UN Women and SALAR International.

Her principal professional interests include gender-responsive governance in territorial community development, the integration of gender approaches in education, gender-sensitive workplace initiatives for people with family responsibilities, and strengthening women's political participation.

Serhii Sharshov

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Magnus Liljeström

Senior Adviser to the international projects of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. Originally trained as a journalist, he has worked in international development cooperation since 1990. He also has extensive experience as a local politician and as an active participant in a range of civil society organisations.

