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Inclusive Local Digital Participation in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine

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Summary

Citizens' engagement and participation are key features of a democratic society. The rapid digital transformation of society over the recent years has further strengthened the phenomenon of participation in virtual space better known as digital participation or e-democracy. Digital participation is easy and affordable, and it can reach a wide audience. It has also proved to be effective in achieving better transparency, accountability, and efficiency of the public sector. Moreover, digital participation comes in handy at times of crises and disasters such as the coronavirus pandemic.

E-democracy is of particular importance for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Democracy-building in these countries began after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and somehow coincided with the world's fast-paced digital transformation. The three young democracies were impacted by the nexus between democratic development and digital transformation, which resulted in many successful cases of digital governance and participation. While some national-level cases like Ukraine's Prozorro or Georgia's e-service portal my.gov.ge are more famous, digital participation and its ability to engage vulnerable groups at the local level receive significantly less attention.

Digital participation in the three countries faces several challenges that prevent it from reaching wide inclusion of vulnerable groups.

This paper explores to what extent digital participation in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine is inclusive and how to boost it for the most vulnerable groups. It argues that e-democracy is a bottom-up phenomenon and is most effective at the local level. Given that the three countries have prioritized decentralization and local-administration reforms, it is of particular importance to examine their existing e-democracy tools and how well they include vulnerable groups. In particular,

the paper looks into such forms of digital participation as e-petitions, participatory budgeting, and e-consultations, which are among the most advanced and widely used in the three countries.

Digital participation tools at the local level are relatively new to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. While some services are better developed and achieve wider participation, including e-petitions in Ukraine or participatory budgeting in Georgia, other instruments like e-consultations are not regulated by law, are non-binding, and are therefore less effective. Digital participation in the three countries faces several challenges that prevent it from reaching wide inclusion of vulnerable groups. These include poor connectivity, lack of digital skills, weak data protection and cybersecurity, low trust in local government, and low awareness of existing digital participation tools. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the "digital divide" and shed light on the existing challenges related to digital inequalities. All these challenges negatively impact the use of e-democracy services. While there has been a higher demand for digital participation during the pandemic, the digital divide and other challenges in the digital space has made it impossible for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine to leapfrog to full-fledged digital democracy at the local level.

Finally, the paper suggests important conditions and makes recommendations for achieving inclusive digital participation at the local level. Elements such as the Internet, access to personal computers and mobile phones, and digital skills must be recognized as essential and be accessible to all citizens. This should be reflected in legislation and its implementation. Moreover, these must be accessible for people with disabilities and guarantee personal data protection. Trust in local authorities and awareness of the impact of digital engagement could ensure the wide participation of citizens in local decision-making in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Finally, cooperation with the EU would help to ensure that best practices on digital inclusion are implemented.

Introduction

Civil society and citizens' engagement and participation are key features of a democratic society. A solid and inclusive democracy is undoubtedly based on a wide participation of civil society. However, "offline democracy" has never been fully accessible to all citizens. For example, collecting physical signatures for petitions, participating in citizens' consultations that normally take place during working hours, or organizing participatory budgeting campaigns require a lot of time and is not possible for most population. The online options for participation—e-democracy—have opened an opportunity to include a larger number of citizens in decision-making by simplifying participation processes and saving time.

Moreover, social distancing and quarantine measures introduced during the coronavirus pandemic proved the critical value of digital public services and digital participation. Digital participation tools such as e-petitions, e-budgets, and e-consultations could contribute to resolving some societal challenges and enhancing citizens' involvement in politics, especially in times of such crises or disasters. Digital participation is easy and affordable, and it can reach a wide audience. It has also proved to be effective in achieving better transparency, accountability, and efficiency of the public sector.¹

However, digital participation comes with new challenges to achieving truly inclusive civic engagement. While some citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) are embracing the benefits of e-democracy, a wide range of citizens and groups either does not have access to these tools or lacks digital skills to benefit from them. Some issues such as limited access to digital services and infrastructures as well as the lack of digital skills hinder an inclusive access to e-democracy. This is particularly true for some vulnerable groups, people with visual impairments, elderly persons, or people who live below the poverty line, including people who do not have access

to Internet and technologies. Moreover, cybersecurity threats, personal data breaches and disinformation undermine the promising benefits of e-democracy.

In this paper, digital participation is defined as participation in public policy and decision-making using digital technologies. It is also a synonym to digital democracy, e-democracy, and e-participation. Inclusive digital participation means the practice or policy of providing equal access to digital opportunities and resources to people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized. The paper specifically looks at such e-democracy tools as e-petitioning, e-budgeting, and e-consultation platforms, which are the easiest and most effective ways to vote on or to initiate policy proposals. They are also the most popular digital democracy tools in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Digital participation comes with new challenges to achieving truly inclusive civic engagement.

Also, e-democracy is a bottom-up phenomenon, with most of the activity happening at the local level. At the local level it allows citizen to have the most effective opportunity to participate actively and directly in decisions made for all of society. A vigorous and effective local democracy is the underlying basis for a healthy and strong national-level e-democracy. Moreover, Georgia², Moldova,³ and Ukraine⁴ have prioritized decentralization and the transfer of power to the local level.⁵ Therefore, this paper pays specific attention to digital participation at the local level.

This paper explores to what extent digital participation in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine is inclusive

1 European Parliament, [Resolution on e-democracy in the European Union: potential and challenges](#), February 16, 2017.

2 Ministry of Local Development of Georgia, [Decentralisation strategy 2020-2025](#).

3 Government of Moldova, [Organization and functioning of local public administration authorities](#), November 30, 2019.

4 Decentralisation Reform of Ukraine, [Stages of decentralisation reform](#), December 10, 2020.

5 Interview with Vano Chkhikvadze, EU integration program manager at Open Society Georgia Foundation, November 27, 2020, online.

and how to boost the participation of the most vulnerable groups there. The three countries share a similar historic path in democracy-building and civic participation as well as in support for digital tools in governance and decision-making. According to one expert, the popularity of e-democracy in those countries stems from the fact that their democracy-building paths coincided with the digital revolution and fast-paced digital transformation.⁶ Naturally, both processes complemented each other and contributed to civic engagement and further democratization. Moreover, these countries developed close relations with each other as well as with the EU in digital economy and e-governance, which could also be extended to deepened cooperation on e-democracy.

The State of Play

E-participation has become a common instrument used by authorities in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine for civic engagement and influencing decision-making at the local level. It is difficult to trace the starting point and main drivers of e-participation in these countries, but most experts say that first e-democracy services appeared with the development of digital technologies and became popular after important political junctures. Digital participation appeared first on social-media platforms, with the widest engagement on Facebook. While social-media engagement remains one of the main channels of communicating and influencing decision-making, other digital democracy services including e-consultations, e-petitions, and participatory budgeting were launched by either local governments or citizens.

In Ukraine, it was the Revolution of Dignity that advanced citizens' mobilization for reforms and social action not only on the streets but also online. After it, state institutions became more open, transparent, and willing to cooperate with citizens on decision-making, especially at the local level. The decentralization reform has also had an important impact on the increase of digital participation at the local level. After receiving

more power and resources, local authorities were able to support participatory budgeting projects and other innovative solutions to citizens' participation as well as to meaningfully involve citizens in e-consultations. The decentralization reform gave local authorities more freedom to introduce innovative solutions to citizens' participation and engagement.

In Georgia, e-democracy services became possible due to the Open Government Partnership Initiative, an organization of reformers inside and outside of government working to transform how government serves its citizens, which Georgia joined in 2011. It was one of the first countries to adopt a two-year National Action Plan, which included provisions on e-governance. However, the e-democracy component became more prominent in Georgia's National Action Plan for 2018–2019 with some clear commitments on boosting digital participation instruments, and specific attention to participatory budgeting, public opinion surveys, and e-feedback systems.

No major political event has given rise to the popularity of e-democracy services in Moldova but, according to some experts, the election of Maia Sandu as president in late 2020 could change this. The country started on its digital democracy path about ten years ago, in a process led by Stela Mocan, the first government chief information officer.⁷ Joining the Open Government Partnership in 2011 has also supported the development of e-democracy services and its support within the society.

Finally, the coronavirus pandemic accelerated the interest in digital participation tools in all three countries. Their citizens have appreciated e-services as they provided a safe option for engagement with decision-makers. By not visiting government offices and standing in queues, people could avoid risking their health and lives. According to most experts interviewed, e-participation services will play a more significant role in all three countries during the rest of the pandemic and after.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Interview with Artur Gurau, CEO of VoteMeApp, November 23, 2020, online.

The development of digital participation in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine is evaluated annually for the UN E-Participation Index,⁸ in which Ukraine ranked 46th out of 193 countries in 2020, Moldova 55th, and Georgia 80th. All three improved their ranking starting from 2018 by simplifying access to communication technologies and enabling influence on decision-making. However, the share of people who use e-participation services is only 3–5 percent on average with the highest e-participation rate in Ukraine (5 percent) and lowest in Moldova (3 percent).⁹ E-petitions, participatory budgeting, and e-consultations have been the most popular and effective e-democracy tools in the three countries so far.

E-petitions

E-petitions tend to be most used at the national level, but they are also an important tool for civic engagement at the local level. However, all three countries lack wide and active involvement of citizens into e-petitioning, and only Ukraine has a law that obliges local authorities to give feedback to the e-petitions receiving enough votes to be submitted for approval. However, the effectiveness of e-petition tools depends on the readiness and willingness of local authorities to meaningfully engage with citizens. Another issue is the lack of funding for developing of e-petition tools and for supporting e-petitions initiatives supported by citizens. Moreover, most e-petition services were developed with financial assistance from international donors without effective coordination among them, local authorities, and citizens, and they failed to meet citizens' expectations and needs.¹⁰

In Ukraine, more than 1 million people used e-petitions in 130 amalgamated communities in 2019. Online platforms that accept e-petitions are the E-Democracy Platform, Rozumne Misto, websites of amalgamated communities of Ukraine, and My Voice.

The awareness of e-petitions in Ukraine is higher compared to other e-participation services and they are an effective way to influence decision-making.¹¹

In Georgia, there are several e-petition services at the local level, the biggest of which is *ichange.ge*. While it is possible to register a petition to local authorities using the *ichange.ge* e-service, it is targeted primarily at national decision-making. The other e-petition services are integrated within local authorities' websites, which lack usability and interactive design. Also, these websites are rarely used and most citizens are not aware of their e-petition function.¹² For example, the e-petition page of Tbilisi's city council is rarely used as most residents do not know about this tool.

In Moldova, there are no specific e-petition services for civic engagement at the local level. Citizens can register e-petitions with international platforms such as *Change.org* or *Avaaz* to attract the attention of decision-makers to specific problems. As there is no legal obligation to respond to e-petitions, most municipalities fail to react to citizens' initiatives.¹³ At the same time some municipalities have developed different e-tools to organize public consultations or where citizens can voice their concerns on issues in cities and regions. For example, Chisinau allows citizens to register appeals to the city council with demands and suggestions regarding such things as infrastructure, garbage, and the condition of streets.

Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting is another effective tool for civic engagement and participation at the local level. It allows citizens to propose and vote for projects that are financed by city budgets. Participatory budgeting is well developed in Moldovan and Ukrainian cities while in Georgia it is used only in Kutaisi and Rustavi.

8 UN E-Government Knowledgebase, [E-Participation Index](#), accessed on November 27, 2020.

9 Ibid.

10 Interview with Anna Mysyshyn, director of the Institute of Innovative Governance, Kyiv, Ukraine, November 1, 2020, online.

11 Interview with Oleksandra Pidenko, national moderator of EGAP Ukraine, October 6, 2020.

12 Interview with Teona Turashvili, media, internet and innovations direction head, November 23, 2020, online.

13 Interview with Vlada Ciobanu, program manager at National Democratic Institute Moldova, November 24, 2020, online.

For all three countries participatory budgeting is a new instrument that is being tested by different communities and municipalities, usually with support from donor organizations. It is predominantly practiced in the mixed online-offline format. However, in Ukraine the coronavirus pandemic has facilitated the transition to online voting for participatory budgeting projects and the decrease of offline voting.¹⁴

In Ukraine, the first participatory budgeting instruments appeared in 2015–2016 after the Revolution of Dignity and the beginning of the decentralization reform. The first and most successful participatory budgeting is being practiced by Kyiv, which allocates about €300,000 for citizens' projects and initiatives. So far, participatory budgeting has been introduced in at least 154 communities, which spend 0.4–0.5 percent of their budget on through it. This percentage increases each year. In Ukraine, participatory budgeting appears to be the most successful case of citizens' engagement at the local level.

In Georgia, participatory budgeting is practiced in Kutaisi and Rustavi with support from the EU.¹⁵ It is organized by the citizens centers that provide public services to people at the local level. Otherwise, participatory budgeting has not gained popularity in the country so far. Initiatives by local authorities to introduce it did not gain support among citizens and activists, which is the main reason for its limited use.¹⁶

In Moldova, despite citizens' interest and some grassroots initiatives to launch participatory budgeting in multiple cities, there are only few active instances of it at the local level. Ialoveni, Budești, Bălți, Chișinău, Florești, Ungheni, Cahul, and Cimișlia started to launch participatory budgeting from 2017. In 2018, 73 projects were registered and 20, valued at MDL 3 million collectively, were accepted.¹⁷ However, the

existing tools are burdensome and not participatory enough.¹⁸ In most cities, after a project is submitted by residents to the city council, it is uploaded in the PDF format to its website so that everyone can see and review it. However, there is no system for voting on projects and the criteria by which projects are selected are not clear. Moreover, the participatory budgeting does not involve many people due to cumbersome design as well as lack of information and interactivity.

E-consultations

The benefits of e-consultations include the reduction of transaction costs, increased participation rates, the inclusion of diverse social groups, and accelerated feedback iterations.¹⁹ While it is widely accepted in all three countries that public consultations are important instruments for effective decision-making at the local level, only few cities and local authorities have introduced online consultations tools. All three also lack legislation on e-consultations at the local level. Even face-to-face public consultations are rarely regulated by municipalities, which creates an issue concerning delivery on consultation results and accountability of local authorities.²⁰ In the last year, the coronavirus pandemic has facilitated thinking on how to effectively engage citizens into urban planning using online tools.

In Ukraine, since e-consultations are not regulated by law and are not binding, their application varies across cities and communities. For instance, in 2019 Kyiv City Council launched 377 e-consultations, which involved about 35,000 residents or 1.6 percent of the adult city population, which is quite low.²¹ Other cities and communities reach a similar level of participation for e-consultations. It is mostly civil society activists and CSOs that participate in e-consultations rather than ordinary citizens and vulnerable groups.²²

14 Interview with anonymous public expert from Ukraine, October 12, 2020.

15 Open Government Partnership, [Participatory Budgeting](#), November 2018.

16 Interview with Teona Turashvili.

17 IPN Press Agency, "[Participatory budgeting at local level implemented in Moldova](#)," September 4, 2020.

18 Interview with Vlada Ciobanu.

19 E-Consultation Knowledgebase, [Benefits of consultation & participation in public decision making](#), November 2020.

20 Interview with Vlada Ciobanu.

21 Dmytro Khutkyy, [Electronic Democracy in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. Patterns and Comparative Perspectives](#), June 2019.

22 Interview with Anna Mysyshyn.

For instance, in Drohobych, one of the most digitally advanced cities in Ukraine, e-consultations have been difficult to implement as they could not reach older population with online tools.²³

In Georgia too, e-consultations are not regulated by law and are not of a binding nature. Most public consultations have taken place in person so far. However, several municipalities, including Akhaltsikhe and Kutaisi, have introduced some e-consultation instruments such as electronic public-opinion surveys for planning of cities' new initiatives and electronic feedback systems that are used to evaluate projects and new initiatives.²⁴ Citizens' engagement in e-consultations is still very low due to the wide digital divide and lack of digital skills, low awareness of initiatives, and low trust in local authorities²⁵.

In Moldova as in Georgia and Ukraine, there is no legislation on e-consultations and regulations for public consultation are not enforced. Most e-consultations take place via surveys and Google forms on social media, usually Facebook. Also, there is no system in place to ensure the regularity and order of such initiatives, which so far has been heavily dependent on the will of local decision-makers.²⁶ Other notable e-consultation platforms are particip.md and the e-consultation web page of Chisinau's city council. Particip.md is by far the most used e-consultation platform but it is used mostly for national consultations, exists only in the Romanian language, and does not foresee any binding obligation by authorities to provide feedback on citizens' comments.

Cooperation with the EU and Member States

While the support for wider access to digital public services, enhanced data protection, and digital economy is crucial for inclusive digital participation, the Association Agreements that Georgia, Moldova,

and Ukraine signed with the EU, as well as other digital cooperation policies and programs, do not mention e-democracy. However, this could be an important area of experience exchange. The same applies to other EU strategic agreements, policies, and programs—support for e-democracy and inclusive digital participation and citizens' engagement is not prioritized. However, the EU and the three countries could benefit from such cooperation by sharing best practices and mutually contributing to participatory decision-making.

The lack of interest in prioritizing e-democracy in the EU's digital cooperation with its partner countries stems from the low support to digital participation within the current and next EU digital policies. In the last five years, only three EU programs have funded work directly related to digital democracy: the Rights, Equality and Citizenship program (2016),²⁷ the Erasmus+ Forward Looking Cooperation Projects (2015),²⁸ and the Horizon 2020 Inclusive, Innovative and Reflective Societies program (2014).²⁹ The European Commission rather focused on enhancing the Digital Single Market, especially access to e-government services, e-health, telecommunications, and e-infrastructure rather than supporting e-democracy projects.

Under the EU's new Multi-annual Financial Framework, the European Commission has proposed a €6.7 billion Digital Europe program, with five priorities for 2021–2027: supercomputers, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, digital skills, and the wider use of digital technologies, mainly for public administration and services. Digital Europe will also be available for cooperation with partner countries, including Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. E-democracy is expected to be addressed under e-government initiatives and is not included as a separate priority. Such hesitance to support e-democracy projects is caused

23 Ibid.

24 Open Government Partnership, [Georgia Action Plan 2018-2019](#), December 4, 2018.

25 Interview with Miranda Tkabladze, programme manager at IFES, November 1, 2020.

26 Interview with Vlada Ciobanu.

27 European Commission, [Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme](#), December 2020

28 European Commission, [Erasmus+ Priorities](#), September 2020.

29 European Commission, [Horizon 2020 Priorities](#), July 2016.

by unaddressed challenges in the digital space: disinformation and misinformation, lack of data protection and cybersecurity, and risks related to direct democracy such as rising populism, voter fatigue, and additional costs for participation.³⁰

However, despite these challenges, e-democracy brings many opportunities, especially at the local level. The EU could learn from Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine on positive examples of e-democracy as well as sharing its experiences and any reservations. The three countries could benefit from the EU's expertise on digital inclusion, fighting the digital divide, and ensuring personal data protection.

To sum up, digital participation services at the local level are relatively new to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. While some services are better developed and reach wider participation, such as e-petitions in Ukraine or participatory budgeting in Georgia, other e-democracy instruments like e-consultations are not regulated by law and are non-binding. Digital democracy services in the three countries fail to ensure wide and inclusive involvement of citizens, especially vulnerable groups. Finally, they could benefit from cooperation with each other and with the EU in the area of e-democracy by sharing experiences about challenges and exchanging best practices.

Prerequisites for Inclusive Participation

Digital participation reaches certain groups that are difficult or impossible to reach with traditional forms of participation. At the same time, it does not guarantee wide inclusion of different groups in civic engagement. The following challenges need to be addressed to reach every group in society and to ensure wide inclusion:³¹

- Bridging the digital divide, a barrier to digital participation that is particularly impacting people who live in remote areas and do not have access to the Internet and people in poverty who cannot

afford computers or more than one computer per family unit.

- Ensuring accessibility and usability of digital participation tools including for people with visual disabilities.
- Making information and success stories on influencing decision-making with e-democracy tools widely available.
- Increasing trust in local authorities, which includes trust in decision-makers and in digital participation services.
- Ensuring personal data protection and cybersecurity of e-democracy services.

Eliminating the digital divide is vital for the inclusiveness of e-democracy. There is a wide variety of factors that foster the digital divide, such as low-income, absence of Internet connection, low levels of education, lack of digital skills and literacy, and limited access to quality ICTs. Connectivity and affordability of digital services are the primary, most pressing issues on the way to digital inclusion, with about 30 percent of people in Europe not having access to fixed broadband.³² People who live below the poverty line are also more likely to be victims of digital divide.³³ Another major issue is the lack of knowledge and understanding of digital technologies. Different studies show that about 30 percent of the EU population have low digital skills.³⁴

Another prerequisite for inclusive digital participation is accessibility of digital services. There can be no democracy without respect for human rights and inclusion of all societal groups. People with visual, hearing, and cognitive disabilities have different needs when it comes to digital technologies and it is a duty of governments to make sure that e-democracy platforms, including those developed by the public sector, CSOs, the private sector, or grassroots initiatives are accessible to people with disabilities. Accessibility

30 European Parliament Research Center, [Digital Human Rights and The Future of Democracy](#), December 2, 2020.

31 Council of Europe, [E-Democracy Handbook](#), August 27, 2020.

32 European Commission, [Broadband and Connectivity in the Digital Single Market](#), November 2020.

33 Spotlight on Poverty, [Digital Divide](#), accessed on October 10, 2020.

34 Eurostat, [Digital Skills in the EU](#), accessed on October 12, 2020.

criteria also extends to the user-centricity design of digital services that makes digital platforms simple and comfortable to access. Platforms that are easy to navigate contribute to increased visits and use by citizens.³⁵

When it comes to inclusiveness of e-democracy, the issue of availability of information and success cases is rarely mentioned; however, the differences in access to information hinder equal access to digital participation. Not only do citizens need to be aware of existing e-democracy platforms to be able to influence decision-makers, they also need to have access to information about governmental policies, budgets, and other open data that would help them make empowered decisions about their lives and provide important input to decision-makers. Another important prerequisite for ensuring wide and inclusive use of e-democracy services are success stories. Citizens are more likely to turn to e-democracy platforms to influence decision-making when they see the success of some campaigns.³⁶

Another issue that impacts the inclusiveness of digital participation is trust in the government. This works in two ways. When citizens meaningfully interact with public authorities and successfully influence decision-making, it increases their trust. But if the experience of using e-democracy services is negative, it may decrease trust in public authorities.³⁷ Therefore, in addition to the opportunities that e-democracy offers to increase citizens' trust in local authorities, a poorly designed and not inclusive e-democracy service may have a negative impact on it.

The final important prerequisite of inclusive digital participation is personal data protection and the cybersecurity of e-democracy services. There are multiple challenges to e-democracy from the perspective of data protection and cybersecurity. The first is related to the different approaches to anonymity and to iden-

tification and verification of citizens. Some e-participation services are designed to be anonymous, which can better protect personal data of users. However, in most cases e-democracy platforms require identification to ensure that it is actual citizens who engage in decision-making. Identification and verification require citizens' personal data, which can be a target of cyberattacks or used for purposes other than e-democracy.³⁸ Several solutions to personal data protection and cybersecurity for e-democracy services are being considered, including data encryption, digital signatures verification, regular independent cybersecurity audits, and the use of open code.

Factors Hindering Inclusive Participation

While e-democracy services provide an additional mean for citizens to communicate with and influence decision-making, it is important that they are inclusive and accessible to the whole of society, including vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities, elderly persons, and people who do not have access to the Internet and lack digital skills. An inclusive approach to digital participation could not only help to boost participation of vulnerable groups but also improve the citizens' engagement overall.

The issue that has the primary impact on inclusiveness of e-democracy is the digital divide. Despite the fact that Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine each have a booming IT and tech industry, there is a widening gap between old and young, men and women, and urban and rural people with regard to access to, and the use of the Internet and modern digital technologies. Connectivity and affordability, lack of digital literacy and education, cybersecurity and data protection challenges, and the low level of accessibility of e-democracy platforms and little information about them prevent these countries from increasing the digital participation of citizens. Despite having an immense effect on e-democracy tools at the local level, these issues are addressed mostly at the national level. However, with the ongoing decentralization reforms,

35 Usability Knowledgebase, [Creating a User-Centered Approach in Government](#), accessed on October 15 2020.

36 N. Hrytsiak and S. Soloviov, [E-Democracy Handbook](#), 2015, Kyiv, Ukraine.

37 Ibid.

38 Council of Europe, [E-Democracy Handbook](#), September 11, 2020.

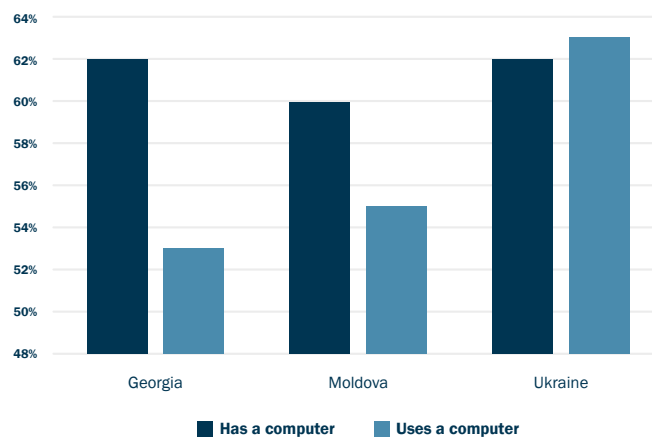
local governments are increasingly stepping up their efforts to ensure inclusive digital participation.

Available digital infrastructure does not meet connectivity needs, especially in remote areas.

Digital infrastructure, affordability of Internet, and basic digital skills are necessary prerequisites for inclusive digital democracy. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine share similar issues on digital needs—Internet access in remote areas and villages is usually worse than in big cities, and the younger population is connected to Internet better than older people. Moreover, computer use remains low in the three countries. (See Figure 1.) The number of Internet users in the three countries is slightly lower than the EU average. (See Figure 2.) The monthly prices for Internet access in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are much lower compared to the EU average. The average prices for 200+ mbps for fixed broadband and 1 GB for mobile broadband are compared in Figure 3.

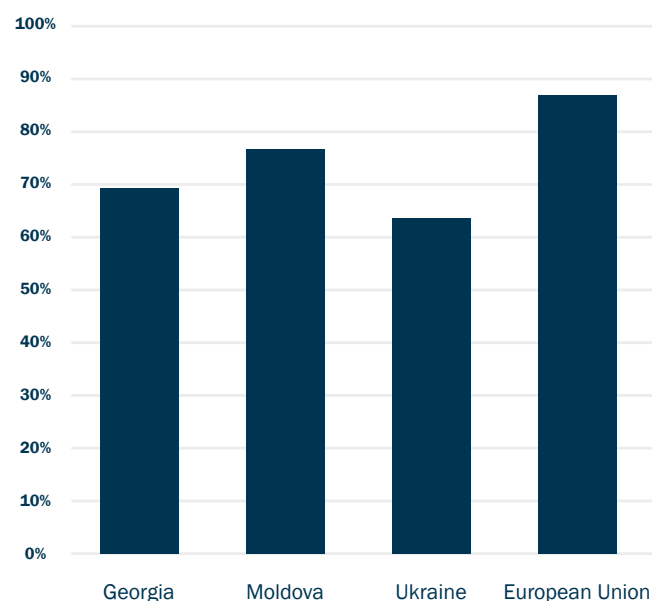
In Georgia, about 70 percent of people have access to wired and broadband Internet. The number of Internet and mobile phone subscriptions continues to grow, but high prices for services, inadequate infrastructure, and slow Internet speeds remain obstacles. Mobile phones significantly outnumber landlines as reception is available throughout the country, including rural areas. The biggest challenge is providing Internet access, especially wired, in mountain regions.³⁹ In general Internet prices in Georgia are much lower than average European prices, making it fairly affordable, with a monthly mobile broadband plan of 1GB costing approximately €1.50. The cost of an average monthly fixed-line broadband subscription is approximately €15 for 20mbps per month.⁴⁰ Forty-four percent of Georgians have basic digital skills include the knowledge of using computers and Internet.⁴¹

Figure 1. Computer Use per Household in 2019



Source: ITU World Telecommunications/ICT Indicators Database, 2020

Figure 2. Internet Users as Share of Population, 2019 Source: ITU World

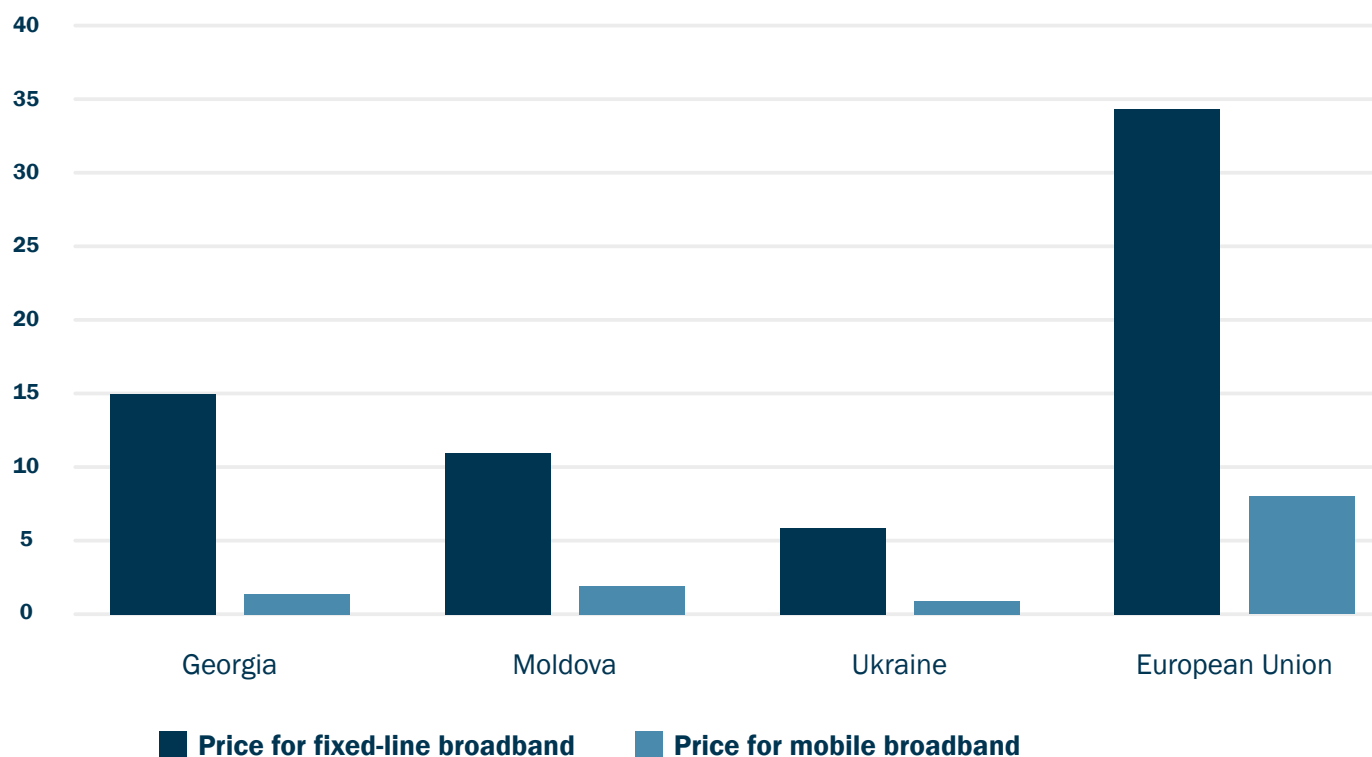


Telecommunications/ICT Indicators Database, 2020; Eurostat, *Digital economy statistics – household and individuals*, September 2020.

39 Interview with Artur Gurau.

40 Investor Georgia, [A snapshot of the country's internet infrastructure](#), November 2019.

41 World Bank, [Digital Skills Indicators](#), accessed on October 15, 2020.

Figure 3. Average Cost of Internet per Month, euros.

Source: Phonetravelwiz, [Sim Cards in Moldova](#), accessed on November 13, 2020; Na Chasi Ukraine, [The cost of mobile internet](#), accessed on October 10, 2020; InvestorGe, [The Georgia wide web](#), April 20, 2020; EU Digital Strategy, [Fixed broadband prices in Europe](#), 2018; EU Digital Strategy, [Mobile broadband prices in Europe](#), 2019.

About 90 percent of Moldova's 3 million people have access to good quality and affordable Internet access; however, the penetration rate is only 70 percent with the lowest use in villages and remote areas as well as among older population. The price for wired Internet is €11 dollars on average per month. According to interviewee, the reason for lower penetration is not the price of Internet but the high price of computers and smartphones.⁴² In big cities 84.8 percent of people have computers while in rural areas only 56.3 percent do. While smartphones are more affordable their usage

differs among population group with about 92 percent of young people having at least one smartphone while for older people only 12 percent have smartphones. Fifty-six percent of Moldovan population have basic digital skills.⁴³

In Ukraine, there are 26 million Internet users of mobile and wired connection. Sixty-four percent of Ukrainians use the Internet once a month or more often, with the highest Internet usage among people under the age of 45. In big cities 74 percent use the Internet regularly while in rural areas at the figure is 54 percent. At the same time, 37 percent of Ukrai-

⁴² Interview with Lucia Aprodu, senior expert in communications and public affairs, October 8, 2020.

⁴³ World Bank, [Digital Skills Indicators](#), accessed on October 15, 2020.

nians, in particular the older population, never use Internet.⁴⁴ Many remote communities and villages are not connected to wired Internet as providers find it unprofitable to offer this. Also, connection in areas close to the war zones and occupied territories in eastern Ukraine is often interrupted and limited. Even outside of the occupied territories, the law on the state of emergency allows for certain restrictions on the connection and transmission of information through computer networks during emergencies.⁴⁵

The average cost of a fixed-line broadband package in Ukraine is €5.64 per month. However, the prices for Internet, especially wired Internet in villages and cities, differ dramatically. Depending on where the village is located the price may be two or three times higher than that in cities. That is because providers need to invest much more in cables and wires to provide access in remote communities. Fifty-three percent of Ukrainians have basic digital skills and 15.1 percent do not have any digital skills at all.⁴⁶

Groups that are affected most by digital divide in the three countries are the older population, people living in villages and remote communities, and people living in poverty. However, the older generation of Ukrainians stands out in terms of limited opportunity for access, due to the skills gap and high cost of connectivity relative to income. The group with better access to Internet and digital skills level is the younger generation, which makes it a primary target for e-participation by local authorities.

E-democracy platforms are not accessible to people with visual and other disabilities

People with visual and other disabilities experiences additional barriers to digital participation. Most of the e-democracy platforms in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are not adapted to their needs. For e-platforms to be accessible for people with disabilities, the

accessibility criteria set by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) must be fulfilled.⁴⁷ They include recommendations on web page structure, colors, images, and transcripts of audio and video content. Moreover, making web platforms more accessible results in an overall better user experience for everyone, not only for those with disabilities.

In Georgia, about 7,000 people have visual disabilities,⁴⁸ while in Moldova the number is 4, 000.⁴⁹ In Ukraine, 300,000 people have visual disabilities, of whom 40,000 are blind.⁵⁰ Moreover, from 60 to 80 percent of children have eyesight issues in Ukraine⁵¹ while there is a similar issue in Georgia and Moldova as well. As the number of people with visual disabilities is very high, the adaptation of e-democracy platforms to their needs must be an urgent priority. An analysis of the biggest e-petition, participatory budgeting, and e-consultation web pages of a selection of city councils in the three countries shows that 95 percent of these are not accessible for people with visual impairments with an average number of 24 errors, 80 warnings, and 70 recommendations per platform.⁵²

Level of trust in local authorities and digital participation services is low

Level of trust is another important factor that impacts on inclusive digital participation of all societal groups. As mentioned above, low trust in local authorities prevents citizens from active engagement via e-democracy platforms. At the same time, effective digital participation can increase citizens' trust. The level of trust in local authorities in all three countries is low

44 State Statistics of Ukraine, [Internet Usage](#), accessed on October 12, 2020.

45 Legislation Database of Ukraine, [Constitution of Ukraine \(2004, amended 2019\)](#).

46 World Bank, [Digital Skills Indicators](#), accessed on October 15, 2020.

47 [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#), 2018.

48 City Institute Georgia, [Blind people of Georgia](#), November 10, 2020.

49 Newsmaker, [About the Lives of Blind People in Moldova](#), July 2020.

50 Kyiv State Center of Social Rehabilitation, [Number of blind people in Ukraine](#), October 10, 2020.

51 Konkurent.UA: [Children's eyesight is dropping](#), June 2019

52 The following e-democracy platforms were analyzed with the analytical software [inclusivewebchecker.org](#): [e-dem.ua](#), [rozumnemisto.org](#), [https://lviv.pb.org.ua/](#), [gb.kyivcity.gov.ua](#), [https://kremen.pb.org.ua/](#), [https://zp.gov.ua/](#); [https://drohobych-rada.gov.ua/](#); [http://particip.gov.md/](#); [https://ichange.gov.ge/](#); [http://www.batumicc.ge/](#); [http://tbilisi.gov.ge/](#); [https://www.chisinau.md/](#)

but higher than trust in national authorities. Also, according to interviewees, most citizens who engaged with local decision-makers via e-democracy platforms believe that it increased the transparency and accountability of local government.

In Georgia, 32 percent of citizens say they trust local authorities—6 percent fully and 26 percent trusting more than distrusting them.⁵³ This low trust can be explained by the soviet legacy of top-down, central decision-making that did not leave local authorities with sufficient powers to react to citizens' appeals or questions on time. Over time, the consistent delays or failures in solving problems created systemic distrust and civic apathy based on the feeling that “my voice does not count.”⁵⁴ A low level of trust in local authorities can partially explain low digital participation level in Georgia. And since e-democracy platforms have been introduced only recently, it is difficult to say if they will contribute to an increase in trust.

In Moldova, trust in local authorities is relatively high—16.6 percent of citizens say they fully trust local authorities and 36.3 percent of citizens trusting more than distrusting them. This relatively high level of trust compared to Georgia is due to local authorities having more powers as well as higher transparency and accountability.⁵⁵ However, it does not seem that trust in local authorities is sufficient to raise the level of digital participation, which is quite low.⁵⁶ The low level of trust in the new e-democracy platforms is also due to local authorities' failure to meaningfully engage with citizens offline in the first place.⁵⁷

In Ukraine, trust in local authorities in cities and regions is 32 percent on average, while in the new amalgamated communities (which resulted from the decentralization reform) trust is 52 percent on

average.⁵⁸ Citizens also have a relatively high level of trust in volunteer organizations (63 percent) and NGOs (47 percent), including those that are involved in supporting e-democracy.⁵⁹ Despite this, digital participation level is quite low, estimated at about 3–5 percent, which can be explained by other factors, including lack of information about e-democracy platforms.⁶⁰

Thus, e-democracy offers means to improve governance and consequently reinforce public confidence and trust in democratic procedures and values. But to do so effectively, e-democracy services themselves must be trusted. So far, there have not been any studies of this in the three countries, but according to interviewed experts and activists the trust in e-democracy services is still relatively low.⁶¹ This is due to ineffective communication by local authorities, the non-binding nature of some of e-democracy services, and risks of data leakage.

Levels of information and awareness are low

Little information and awareness on e-democracy platforms negatively impacts citizens' participation level and inclusion. The key role in communication on digital participation services should be played by the government. However, according to interviewees, most communication and awareness-raising activities are ensured either by CSOs or citizens in the three countries.⁶² Citizens who launch an e-petition or suggest a project for participatory budgeting tend to advocate for their case via social media and within their communities. CSOs that work on civic engagement also promote e-democracy platforms. For example, in Ukraine CSOs provide guidelines or

53 Caucasus Barometer, [Trust to Public Authorities Statistics](#), accessed on October 12, 2020.

54 Interview with Vano Chkhikvadze.

55 Interview with public servant, October 10, 2020.

56 Interview with Vlada Ciobanu.

57 Ibid.

58 Association of Ukrainian Cities, [Survey on trust to local governments](#), March 5, 2018.

59 Democracy Initiatives Foundation, [Trust to CSOs in Ukraine](#), August 3, 2018.

60 Interview with Anastasiya Popova, independent e-democracy expert, December 1, 2020.

61 Interviews with Anastasiya Popova, Vlada Ciobanu, and Anna Mysyshyn.

62 Interviews with anonymous public servant, Teona Turashvili, and Anna Mysyshyn.

courses on how to use e-democracy services, often supported by international donor governments and organizations.⁶³

Local authorities tend to heavily invest in promoting e-democracy services before elections, according to interviewees.⁶⁴ Election candidates, including the ones from the incumbent governments, initiate popular e-petitions, launch e-consultations, and promote participatory budgeting instruments to gain citizens' support. However, in general local authorities either do not prioritize communication or lack funds for raising awareness of existing e-democracy services.

Data protection and cybersecurity remain a big challenge.

It is essential that proper privacy laws and data protection laws are in place to increase trust in and wider use of e-democracy services. Even though most interviewees point to the fact that there have been only a few cases of cyberattacks or personal data leaks from e-democracy services at the local level in the three countries, it is important to prevent possible insecurity and data breaches by ensuring the effective regulation of personal data and establishing cyber protection systems.⁶⁵

Data protection and the cyber resilience of e-democracy platforms can be ensured by effective personal data protection legislation and its implementation, secure digital ID and signatures systems, and end-to-end encryption. It is also recommended to use open-source software and regularly update cyber-protection software.

All three countries committed to adopting legislation on personal data protection as a prerequisite for visa liberalization with the EU, but they either still lack such legislation or it is poorly enforced. Ukraine is still debating two draft laws that are being developed by

the parliamentary committees on human rights and digital transformation and the Ombudsperson's Office separately. Georgia and Moldova⁶⁶ adopted their respective law on personal data protection in 2011 but these need to be updated in accordance with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation.⁶⁷

None of the e-democracy platforms in the three countries use end-to-end encryption of data and only a few are built on open-source software. As local authorities lack funding to effectively manage citizens' queries regarding those platforms, it is very unlikely that they invest in proper cyber-protection software.⁶⁸ Digital IDs and signatures are another obstacle preventing all three countries from ensuring safe and straightforward digital identification for proposing and voting for civic initiatives. For example, in Ukraine the biggest e-democracy platforms require bank IDs, which a lot of citizens find difficult to obtain and manage.⁶⁹ In Georgia and Moldova, state and mobile IDs are recognized by most e-democracy platforms. However, few activists use digital signatures for civic participation while for the rest digital signature is a barrier for participation.⁷⁰

Therefore, data breaches can expose sensitive information about millions of users and can have potentially life-threatening consequences. While there have been only few attempts to breach personal data from e-democracy platforms at the local level, the fact that such services as public budgeting or e-consultations are becoming more popular mean greater risks. Therefore, all three countries must find ways to ensure data protection so that the issue stops being a barrier for inclusive digital participation.

Finally, the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated digital divide and highlighted existing challenges. Under lockdown, a great number of people in the three countries have struggled to adapt to digital life, either

63 Public Budgeting Website of Ukraine (pb.org.ua), [Effective communication](#), October 10, 2017.

64 Authors interview with anonymous public servant and Vano Chkhikvadze.

65 Interview with Oleksiy Kovalenko, national expert on civil participation at the Council of Europe, September 27, 2020.

66 Madalin Necsutu, "[Sergiu Bozianu: Moldova does not have a privacy law](#)," Balkan Insight September 27, 2020.

67 Legislation Online, [Georgia's Data Protection Law](#), May 1, 2012.

68 Authors interview with Vano Chkhikvadze.

69 Authors interview with anonymous public servant, October 1, 2020.

70 Authors interview with Vlada Ciobanu.

due to a lack of skills, limited access to the Internet, or lack of digital security.

All these challenges negatively impact the use of e-democracy services. While there is a higher demand for digital participation, they made it impossible for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine to make the transition to full-fledged digital democracy.

Overcoming Barriers to Digital Participation

Connectivity, affordability and accessibility of Internet and technologies, data protection and cybersecurity, awareness, and trust in local authorities are key factors the enable digital participation.

The coronavirus pandemic catalyzed discussions on possible ways to remove barriers to digital participation. In Ukraine, the decree On Some Measures to Improve Access to Mobile Internet adopted last year made it possible to remove barriers to the development of new communication technologies and to reduce the digital divide between cities and rural areas.⁷¹ From July 2020, mobile providers managed to connect about 4.7 million people in remote areas and villages to 4G mobile broadband. It is expected that by 2023, 95 percent of the country will have access to 4G mobile Internet, which is the most effective and fastest way to provide high-speed Internet all over the country.⁷² Having set these ambitious goals, the government must now make sure that there is competition among Internet providers that allows for an affordable Internet price in remote areas and villages. Georgia has also announced a new, World Bank-supported \$100 million project that will make the Internet available to 2,000 cities and villages. It is expected that about 90 percent of the population will have Internet access when the project is finalized.⁷³ Along with providing access in remote areas and villages, it is important that the government ensures that people have access to computers, especially those living in poverty. The same applies for Moldova, where Internet connection

and its price is comparatively good but people living in poverty cannot afford a computer. All three countries should introduce programs to support vulnerable groups in obtaining digital technologies.

Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have also declared an ambition to provide 5G Internet in the near future. 5G Internet, if provided at an affordable price and in remote areas could significantly reduce the digital divide and contribute to increased e-participation. However, governments at the national and local levels should raise awareness on the benefits of 5G and debunk the massive misinformation on the health impacts on this technology. The three countries could join the appeal of 15 EU member states for a Europe-wide campaign on fighting disinformation on 5G technologies.⁷⁴

One of the ways in which Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine could improve their efforts on connectivity and affordability of Internet is cooperation with the EU. Reducing the digital divide between Ukraine and EU countries is a key objective of the EaPConnect project, which is part of the EU4Digital initiative of the EU. These activities align with the neighborhood policy that supports increased interconnectivity and economic development for the EU and its neighbors.⁷⁵

All of the efforts to increase connectivity and ensure affordability of Internet will contribute to a larger number of citizens accessing e-democracy services. Moreover, it is important to recognize that providing Internet, data, and technologies as essential services will take a major push for infrastructure development, mandated affordability, and access to digital technologies.

Lack of basic digital skills must be addressed urgently

Lack of digital skills continues to be a major obstacle to inclusive e-democracy in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. To access e-democracy citizens need to have

71 BRDO Ukraine, [Measures to reduce digital divide](#), July 10, 2019.

72 UkrInform, [Connecting villages to the internet](#), July 2020.

73 World Bank, [Villages to get better connectivity in Georgia](#), August 2020.

74 Politico EU, [Disinformation Letter](#), May 12, 2020.

75 EU4Digital, [New Telecommunication Legislation in Ukraine](#), November 2020.

basic digital skills, affects most the older population and people who do not have access to Internet and computers. The coronavirus pandemic and the shift to online work and digital participation has forced all three countries to prioritize digital skills development. Last year, Ukraine's Ministry of Digital Transformation launched a national online platform on basic digital skills, which offers trainings in edutainment formats, featuring talk shows, movies, and webinars.⁷⁶ Moldova similarly launched online courses on digital skills for teachers and children in 2020.⁷⁷ The effectiveness of these platforms is questionable, though. People who do not have any digital skills will not be able to access them in the first place.⁷⁸ Moreover, the platform in Moldova does not target the group most lacking basic digital skills—the older population. In Georgia there have been no large additional programs on digital skills during the pandemic.

At the same time, while the coronavirus pandemic made authorities shift to increased digital communication and e-participation, there has been no large-scale programs on building relevant skills. One of the most effective solutions to filling the basic digital skills gap and making e-democracy more accessible is the combination of offline and online trainings targeted at vulnerable groups.⁷⁹ While the online component offered by the governments is offered in the form of courses and edutainment videos, the offline trainings are mostly missing.⁸⁰ Local authorities should cooperate with CSOs and volunteer movements that work with vulnerable groups to deliver offline trainings in the most effective way.

Georgian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian local authorities should also seek support from existing international platforms for cooperation on digital skills, such as the EU4Digital Digital Skills Network that serves

as platform for sharing best practices and experiences among the six Eastern Partnership countries and with the EU. So far, the network has focused on advising national governments regarding policies and legislation. However, local authorities from all three countries should share experience and seek practical support on basic digital skills for vulnerable groups from this and other international programs.

Digital accessibility must be a priority

Most of the web platforms and e-democracy services in three countries are not adapted to the needs of people of disabilities. However, the solutions to digital accessibility are quite straightforward and relatively easy to implement. WCAG criteria and guidelines are publicly available at the World Wide Web Consortium and can be used by any country and any web platform.

Despite this, digital accessibility remains a major obstacle to inclusive e-democracy. The reason is low awareness of the issue and the absence of effective legislation and regulations. So far, only Ukraine has made first steps in the direction to digital accessibility by adopting a regulation on unified design for government web services in 2019 and creating a public council on web accessibility in the Ministry for Digital Transformation.⁸¹ However, the regulation lacks a clear implementation strategy and the council does not have implementing powers.

A key to ensuring effective legislation on digital accessibility in three countries could be the implementation of the EU Web Accessibility Directive and the European Accessibility Act.⁸² Both provide rules on digital accessibility that member states should adhere to. Even though not all EU members have transposed the directive into national legislation, there is overall support for it. The directive could be introduced into national legislation in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine as part of the approximation of national law to the EU standards. However, the Web Accessibility Directive was not identified as a priority among regulations and

76 Ministry of Digital Transformation Ukraine, [Digital Education portal](#), accessed on December 12, 2020.

77 Newsmaker Moldova, [Digital Literacy in Moldova](#), June 14, 2020.

78 Interview with Anastasiya Popova.

79 Richard Andrews, [Theories and Models of Online Learning](#), October 2007.

80 Interview with Anastasiya Popova.

81 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Decree on Web Accessibility](#), June 12, 2019.

82 European Union, [Web Accessibility Directive](#), October 26, 2016.

directives to be introduced into national legislation according to the three countries' Association Agreements with the EU.⁸³

In addition to legislation, there must be an awareness of the issue within government and society. In Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine several CSOs promote digital accessibility and provide support to national and local authorities on adapting public platforms to the needs of people with disabilities.⁸⁴ While the role of civil society is important and should be supported via various instruments, there is also an obligation for the government to ensure the availability of public web platforms for vulnerable groups.

There should be more awareness-raising and communication initiatives

Most of the efforts on promoting e-democracy in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have focused on introducing different innovative instruments for e-participation. However, those services will not be used by citizens without proper communication campaigns and awareness-raising initiatives.⁸⁵ Therefore, local authorities should refocus some of their priorities by stepping up communication efforts. At the same time, they should work with CSOs, volunteer movements, activists, the private sector, and media interested and active in e-democracy.⁸⁶ For example, when communicating on e-petition services local authorities could cooperate with the banking sector to explain how to open a bank ID. Cooperation with CSOs and activists is no less important. For instance, when communicating on public budgeting initiatives local authorities could invite CSOs that work with vulnerable groups to introduce or support projects.

As for reaching out to particularly vulnerable groups, it is important for the authorities to raise awareness of available paper or face-to-face alternatives to e-petitions, public budgeting, e-consulta-

tions, and other e-democracy services. Partnerships with civil society, activists, the private sector, and media could support such communication efforts and amplify their results.

Trust can be boosted via e-democracy.

E-democracy has an important value in increasing trust in democratic institutions and governance at the local level. But to do so, e-democracy services should be inclusive, widely used, and trusted by citizens.

To start with, it is important that all stakeholders are involved in developing e-democracy concepts and standards. Deliberate or unconscious exclusion of some groups from e-democracy, including the most vulnerable ones will inevitably decrease trust in local authorities.⁸⁷ It is also important that all stages in the e-democracy processes are transparent to all stakeholders.⁸⁸ This can be done by making sure that all information on procedures is available online in a clear manner.

One solution that could help to increase citizens' trust in e-democracy, and therefore local authorities, is providing feedback to citizens who participate in or initiate e-democracy initiatives or campaigns. Since some of e-democracy services in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are non-binding, it is important for citizens to understand that they contributed to decision-making processes even if some of their ideas or proposals were not implemented.⁸⁹

Moreover, as mentioned above, there being little or no communication on e-democracy services does not contribute to citizens trusting them. Citizens would have more trust if they knew about successful cases of influencing decision-making. Therefore, local authorities should communicate not only on existing e-democracy opportunities but also showcase successful stories of citizens influencing decision-making in this way.

83 Interview with Anna Mysyshyn.

84 For example, the [Institute of Innovative Governance \(Ukraine\)](#) and the [Digital Communication Network \(Georgia, Moldova\)](#).

85 Interview with Anastasiya Popova.

86 Interview with Vano Chkhikvadze.

87 Interview with Anna Mysyshyn.

88 Interview with Vano Chkhikvadze.

89 Ibid.

Citizen's trust in e-democracy services would also increase if they were of a binding nature. So far, only in Ukraine have e-petitions and public budgeting services had a binding component that obliges local authorities to review and approve citizens' initiatives and projects. However, not all e-democracy services in the three countries are binding. For example, most e-consultations and e-initiatives are not followed-up by local authorities as there is no legal framework that obliges them to take into consideration these tools. If citizens do not receive any feedback after contributing to democratic processes, their level of trust in e-democracy and local authorities will decrease.⁹⁰

There must be more cooperation with the EU on data protection

Another factor that could contribute to greater inclusiveness of digital participation is data protection and safety of e-democracy services. Even though data-protection legislation was a prerequisite of signing an Association Agreement with the EU, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine still lack a strong legislative basis on data protection and cybersecurity in line with EU standards. A key to effective legislation on personal data protection is transposition of the General Data Protection Regulation of the EU (GDPR) to national legislations. This requires wide consultations with various stakeholders as well as establishing regulatory institutions and effective legal enforcement strategies. All these steps would require additional support from the EU in the form of financial resources, capacity building, and legal advice.

Moreover, when transposing the GDPR specific attention should be paid to mandatory encryption of personal data. Encryption is one of the best tools in protecting users' privacy from malicious actors, as recognized in the GDPR.⁹¹ Alongside other technical and organizational measures, it is a critical tool to safeguard data against cyber threats and leakages of personal data, including from e-democracy platforms.

Some other concrete solutions for personal data protection and the safety of e-democracy services are the use of open-source software as well as open standards and specifications requirement. Open-source software would enable cybersecurity experts to evaluate and update the security standards of e-democracy services on a regular basis.

Another tool that can ensure secure and credible digital participation is the use of digital signatures. Digital signatures, especially if applied with end-to-end encryption and effective cybersecurity software, are effective in protecting from data breaches. While some e-petitions, participatory budgeting, and e-consultations platforms use email or phone number verification or are anonymous, most of the e-democracy tools require either a bank ID, mobile ID, or state-issued signature to join such platforms. However, ensuring the widespread use of digital signatures is a significant challenge. The precise number of certified digital signatures in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine is unknown. For those who do not have a digital signature yet, participation in e-democracy platforms may not be the sufficient reason to acquire one, especially since obtaining a digital signature requires time, participation in several bureaucratic procedures, and money.

Conclusion

Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine started their digital democracy journey with the development of digital technologies after important democratic junctures. The most popular digital participation tools at the local level in these countries include e-petitions, participatory budgeting, and e-consultation services. When e-participation platforms are used to complement existing democratic processes and implemented in an inclusive manner, digital tools can significantly strengthen democratic participation. Digital democracy is relatively new to the three countries, so it is important to ensure the wide participation of different societal groups, especially vulnerable groups, from the beginning.

⁹⁰ Authors' interview with anonymous local servant, October 10, 2020.

⁹¹ European Commission, [Data Protection Legislation](#).

In order to make digital democracy inclusive, such essential elements as the Internet, personal computers, and mobile phones, together with the digital skills, must be accessible to all citizens. This should be reflected in legislation and its implementation. Moreover, these must be accessible for people with disabilities and guarantee personal data protection. Trust in local authorities and awareness of the impact of digital engagement could ensure wide participation of citizens in local decision making. Finally, cooperation with the EU would help to ensure that the best practices on digital inclusion are implemented.

When e-participation platforms are used to complement existing democratic processes and implemented in an inclusive manner, digital tools can significantly strengthen democratic participation.

Based on the analysis above, the local authorities, national governments, international partners, and CSOs of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine should take into account the following recommendations to boost e-participation and make it more inclusive:

- The three countries should recognize that the Internet, data, and technologies are essential services and basic human rights. This should lead to a major push for infrastructure development, mandated affordability, and access to digital technologies.
- Lack of basic digital skills and e-participation skills must be urgently addressed via capacity-building programs, including online trainings and awareness-raising campaigns.
- As low awareness of e-participation services remains one of the biggest stumbling blocks for wide digital engagement of citizens, it is important to launch information campaigns on available e-participation services and how to use them.

- Digital accessibility must be a priority for policymaking and awareness-raising initiatives on e-participation. All three countries should transpose the EU Digital Accessibility Directive into national legislation and ensure its effective implementation. More efforts should be dedicated to communicating the importance of digital accessibility to citizens.
- To increase trust in e-democracy services and therefore to local government, it is important that local authorities provide timely feedback to citizens who engage in e-participation. Moreover, e-democracy services should be of a binding nature that would oblige local authorities to review and approve citizens' initiatives and projects.
- To ensure data protection and the safety of e-participation services, all three countries should update their legislation on personal data protection by transposing the GDPR into national legislation. They should also introduce end-to-end encryption, e-signatures, and the use of open-source software for e-democracy. The three countries should strengthen cooperation with their key international partner, the EU, on digital democracy to boost inclusive e-participation. Beyond the existing cooperation in the area of digital economy, e-government and digital services as foreseen by their Association Agreements with the EU should also be expanded to e-democracy as a separate priority.

Finally, the coronavirus pandemic has pushed Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine to rethink their digital democracy strategies, which may otherwise have taken years. It is still difficult to say what will be the long-term effect of the pandemic on citizens' engagement at the local level but, if digital democracy is here to stay, now is the time for decision-makers to consider how they can use these new methods to increase accessibility and inclusivity in e-participation. Harnessing the full power of digital technology, while also working to give all societal groups access to digital engagement, will benefit society long into the future.

This work represents solely the opinion of the author and any opinion expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the institution to which the author is affiliated.

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