



# How local government in Ukraine uses electronic consultations to give voice to a war-traumatized society

In recent years, e-democracy in Ukraine has shown that the effective use of online tools can enhance democratic procedures and promote broader engagement in decision-making. Now, digital town hall meetings, virtual debates, and online voting are no longer a rarity.

For Ukraine, a significant achievement in the area of e-democracy was the creation of the **E-DEM DIGITAL PLATFORM** in 2018. This web-based platform, developed with the financial support of the Swiss Confederation Government and implemented by East Europe Foundation and the Innovabridge Foundation, aims to provide citizens easy access to various electronic democracy tools.

These tools include local electronic petitions, participatory budgeting, open city, and electronic consultations. The latter allows citizens to voice their opinions by participating in a poll or by writing a comment online. Since the war with Russia, Ukrainians have also increasingly used e-consultations in a joint derussification effort. Derussification is a political process that aims to erase the Russian colonial legacy.

In this context, residents have suggested taking down monuments that glorify Russian cultural influence or those that represent Soviet political figures responsible for oppression against Ukrainians. They have also insisted that Russian/Soviet street names, squares, and sometimes even cities should be replaced by names of the fallen heroes who fought against Moscow's aggression.

How do these e-democracy tools help the local government meet the needs of the Ukrainian society traumatized by Russian aggression?

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### Platform EDEM

The success of EDEM can be attributed to the range of services and civic engagement options that it offers.

- ▶ The Local Electronic Petitions service — allows residents to influence community development by enabling them to submit petitions that are reviewed by local self-government bodies.
- ▶ Participatory Budgeting — empowers residents to propose projects and to participate in local budget allocation processes.
- ▶ The Open City feature — enables interaction between residents and local authorities, facilitating the resolution of community issues and promoting self-organization among citizens.
- ▶ The Electronic Public Consultations — encourage residents to speak up on city and community development matters.

The effectiveness and convenience of the EDEM platform is evident in numbers. Over **1.9 million Ukrainians** are using the platform's diverse tools.

Additionally, 497 local self-government bodies are connected to the platform, showcasing widespread participation. Since its launch in 2018 the platform has facilitated the submission of 25.000 petitions, supported 1.900 community projects, conducted 1.600 consultations and resolved 30.000 community issues.

According to **Oleksandra Radchenko**, Coordinator of the EGAP Program's E-Democracy Component implemented by East Europe Foundation, EDEM is first and foremost about more seamless and more inclusive bottom-up people-to-government communication.

*'E-democracy is vital as it allows to influence decision-making and budget allocation at community level. On the one hand, it makes it easier for communities' residents to reach out to the government, as citizens know about their own needs and problems better than anyone else does. On the other hand, e-democracy tools are an additional form of communication through which the state can determine key civic issues and concerns and thereby better set its priorities. Because e-democracy is fully public, locals can find like-minded others and to jointly signal a demand for solving a particular community issue,' says Oleksandra.*



The EDEM Platform can be compared to a convenient shop: 'One can enter and immediately see and choose what is available on the community's shelves. Every tool is effective for resolving a particular issue. The Platform provides a range of options that satisfy the redress of arising needs. At their convenience, residents can participate from any location, at any convenient time,' notes Oleksandra Radchenko. Thus, one of the primary roles of EDEM is also to improve access to democratic procedures.



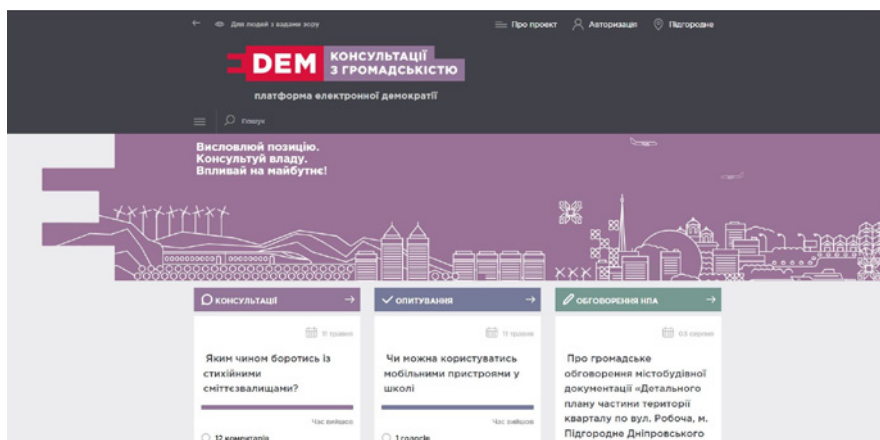
## E-consultations

So how do citizens reflect on and make joint decisions? What is their opinion about a particular law? What are their current needs and priorities?

One specific tool — **electronic consultations** is proving to be very useful for local preference setting and decision-making. Through a convenient online format citizens can voice their opinions and vote on a variety of local issues which can be proposed by either local government, citizens or local organizations. This way, being heard requires less effort.

E-consultations services allow the following options:

- Thematic consultations — here people can comment on solutions for a particular issue posted by the government. For instance, if a community is preparing public events such as Christmas, citizens can provide their ideas.
- Surveys — allow citizens to provide their inputs on specific issues by answering a series of questions posed by the authorities. Some popular recent examples included the renaming of streets with allusions to Russian culture or people. Here citizens could vote via shorter surveys, or polls to state their preferences.
- Legislative inputs — people join online debates and provide their inputs by commenting on specific laws or public projects, typically before they are passed.



Paperless consultations help people and the government to save time and money. They also became very convenient during pandemic times. However, the impact of e-consultations goes beyond cost-effectiveness and convenience.

Importantly, they are about enriching Ukrainian democracy. Online they complement the offline democratic processes by engaging more people in the political life of a community. Political participation is now as easy as ABC since it takes a couple of seconds to vote on a local matter.

For instance, young people tend to be more active online, so they can cast their vote without leaving home or their university. As for the working population, the tool conveniently helps them to stay involved in community life even during office hours.

Importantly, the online consultations also make participation much easier for people with disabilities, for those who are hospitalized, or for the elderly to stay involved, too. In order to partake in e-consultations, all that the prospective users need to do is to register on the platform by using their BankID or electronic digital signature. Currently, as many as 200 communities use e-consultations, with 26,000 registered individual users Ukraine-wide.

The key value of e-consultations is multi-fold. Firstly, they serve as bridges of communication between residents and local authorities, says Oleksandra Radchenko. Secondly, with e-consultations, the initiative comes from the government which is 'a vital tool for policy-making. Because if the government launches such an initiative, it means it is ready to listen to what people have to say. The tool also shows that people can be partners in solving local issues,' says the expert.

*Thirdly, the online tool helps local authorities to prioritize. As Oleksandra notes, 'A community may need to solve problems that cannot be simply resolved by experts. Here, e-consultations come in handy when the government can show to the people that it is willing to listen and act in the interest of the majority which is a foundation for democracy.'*

## E-consultations as a tool of derussification

Although in most cases the authorities are not obliged to adhere to public opinion when making decisions, poll outputs from e-consultations are typically taken into account. Especially when it comes to such sensitive topics, as derussification. With the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion, seeing one's street or a city named after a Russian actor from the USSR times who most likely contributed to Ukraine's colonization crossed a red line for many Ukrainians. E-consultations easily helped to change the situation by enabling neighborhood or cities' residents to pick a new name for their city street.

This was the case for one community in the Pervomayskiy city. **Olha Hlushchenko**, Head of the General Department of Pervomayskiy City Council and moderator of Platform EDEM, shared how e-consultations helped people to choose a new name for the city.



Ukrainians associate the name Pervomayskiy with the industrialization process that the USSR started on the Ukrainian territories that it occupied starting in the 1920s. Industrialization aimed to establish the USSR's military and economic might as well as to implant a totalitarian regime and bolshevik ideology in people's minds. The process was implemented at the expense of peasants and was accompanied by mass repressions.

This Ukrainian city (previously known as Lykhacheve) located in Kharkiv Oblast was named Pervomayskiy which was named after an important Russian, 'First of May's public holiday (during communist era) which honored international workers.

Speaking of workers' rights, one of the tools the USSR used against workers was so-called labor mobilization where the state would put those who refused to work or wanted to leave a factory in concentration camps.

In March 2023, e-consultations for renaming a city were launched, engaging a record number of residents. In the first round of consultations which were conducted in the form of a poll, as many as 759 people, including many youth, took part in the process. The platform enabled to print out the poll's results and lists with people's proposed street names for further consideration. During the second round, residents voted for their city's new name — Khlibodar (from the Ukrainian, 'khlilb' refers to bread and 'dar' refers to gift). The outcomes were then successfully presented at the public meeting of a commission.

Olha Hlushchenko emphasized that with the online format, the council's consultation process was smooth and efficient: 'Personally I found it super easy to work on the platform. Votes were counted automatically. We no longer needed to count ballots, sort papers, fix handwritten errors, and transfer data to digital devices. It was a seamless experience that saved us time, energy, and money.'



**Olha Sytnyk**, the Chief Specialist of Quality System Administration of Legal Policy and Quality Department of the Vinnytsia City Council, which has also uses e-consultations extensively, suggests that the key benefit of e-consultations is greater engagement of the population as e-consultations are accessible for the majority of residents.

*'With mobile devices or personal computers people join public discussions. When it comes to on-site consultations, the tool allows to include various social groups of different age and status. The turnout was great! For example, e-consultations on renaming streets engaged up to 500 residents. In voting for a particular street name, it was easy for people to get involved and also to engage their colleagues, friends, and relatives via the internet. It was an important and large-scale process by our usual standards.'*

Olha Sytnyk points out that e-consultations are a timely innovation, as they address current needs of Ukrainians, who do not want to see Soviet or Russian names of the streets while Moscow is taking away lives of many Ukrainians in the war. 'Most surveys are related to renaming streets. It is an acute need nowadays. And it is very personal for residents: some live, work at a certain street or just cross it every day. So far, as many as 38 streets in the city of Vinnytsia were voted on.'

Previously, the process of renaming streets was conducted differently. Citizens submitted written proposals to local authorities. The local authorities then considered them and consulted on them with the wider public, before the city council voted on these proposals.

*'When we had consultations in a hall, not everyone had a chance to join and to take the microphone to ask questions and to join the discussion. With the new EDEM tool, anyone can provide their remarks and inputs anytime. They can now also speak with the authorities via the survey and officials are obliged to respond to such comments, as if it is a formal request,' says Olha Sytnyk.*