The SVOI Platform: Bridging the Gap between Local Government and Citizens

'**Our work became much easier when we developed a system that works for us,'** notes Iryna Matsiievych, Head of the Chernomorsk Administrative Services Center (Odesa Oblast, Ukraine). The SVOI platform, which was co-created with the assistance of the EGAP Program, sought to resolve bureaucratic chaos. It also automated a series of services and made Administrative Service Centers (ASCs), or CNAPS, more effective.

To public employees in Ukraine, like Iryna Matsiievych, integrated electronic tools and services such as the SVOI platform are about a seamless public service experience.

'To me, it is important that **people are satisfied and our administrators are not overloaded.** Everyone who is acquainted with ASCs' work knows that it is a heavy workload for the administrative staff. We always strive to help our colleagues, so they don't go home exhausted,' says Iryna.

ASCs are the government of Ukraine's initiative arising from Ukraine's decentralization reforms. In an effort to empower local communities to self-organize in the delivery of more effective and transparent services, the reform opened the door to the automation of services and for enhanced democracy. The EGAP Program implemented by East Europe Foundation in collaboration with the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine and with the support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, helps local ASCs to implement digital tools, one of them being e-queue..

What the ASC is

ASCs are local governance centers where citizens can access administrative services. As of 2019, there were 778 ASCs operating in Ukraine.

Before 2013 when ASCs were created, Ukrainians experienced growing frustration over the delivery of administrative services. Scarce information about administrative centers' work and opening hours, inconvenient appointment times, and never-ending queues for the sake of getting a single form were common concerns.

The **2012 Law On Administrative Services** introduced a change. It codified the obligation for state entities to inform citizens about existing administrative services, about their operating times and procedures. The law established ASCs under two guiding principles:

➤ principle of the 'open window', and
➤ principle of a 'transparent office.'

Under the **'open window' principle**, ASCs accept and return documents exclusively through their staff in compliance with the Unified Requirements for administrative services. To make the administrative experience easier and faster, the 'open window' approach takes the burden off the client which is a notable leap toward a human centric governance approach in Ukraine. With the introduction of the law, it is the ASC administrator, not the citizen who is responsible for going the extra mile to obtain additional information in the service delivery process.

Meanwhile, the **'transparent office' principle** means that ASCs deliver more client-oriented services by introducing a single open space, dtransparently documented procedures, concrete operating times, and training personnel about polite customer service. Importantly, these initiatives also contribute to combating corruption at the local level.

Moreover, ASCs are not only about easy access and simplification of administrative services. A key concept behind the reform is that territorial communities, not the central government, are the main providers of public services. Through decentralization, communities obtained greater independence and rights, as well as power and duty to provide services. This way, ASCs facilitate more effective and 'closer' interaction between citizens and the government.

While ASCs offer new opportunities for local communities in service delivery, they also bring up new challenges. The first challenge that arose is *how to inform communities about services that are newly provided by ASCs? How to engage with the local population? And, most importantly, how to build trust between citizens and local governments?*

To address these issues, the EGAP Program launched the SVOI (the *Us*) Platform, a bridge that connects people and the government.

How the SVOI Platform works

SVOI is primarily a website builder for communities. Currently, there are 1,469 territorial communities in Ukraine and each of them needs an online presence for communication and for provision of public information. Since the newly formed communities have low administrative budgets and limited human resources, the SVOI Platform allows communities to develop and customize their own website in a cost-effective way. Based on their specific needs, the SVOI Platform enables communities to flexibly adapt and add new features to their websites. Its goal is to facilitate effective and transparent citizen-government communication.

How does it work in practice? The Platform allows citizens to request information and receive it within minutes, to sign petitions, to monitor the progress of their application, to receive emergency notifications and important news, as well as to participate in opinion polls.

In addition, the SVOI Platform introduces six participatory tools free of charge to local authorities and citizens:

➤ Website builder for communities that helps to create accessible and user-friendly websites.
➤ Chatbot on Viber and Telegram through which citizens can obtain any information related to administrative services; for instance, on changes to legislation, procedures or about ASCs' operating hours.
➤ Electronic petitions which enable people to sign petitions online and thereby enhancing local participatory democracy.
➤ Participatory budgeting through which citizens can participate in budgetary decision-making about specific community projects.
➤ Online consultations that enable citizens to provide their comments and perspectives during local policy-making processes.
➤ Geosystem 'Open City'- a crowdsourcing app that allows people to forward their concerns to appropriate public institutions as well as to propose new public infrastructure projects such as schools, hospitals, parking lots etc. on a virtual map. For example, in Drohobych city, locals filed an online request to municipal authorities asking to cover a sinkhole near a sewer hatch in their community, and in Brovary, to install additional road signs for better traffic regulation.
➤ Owing to its simplicity and integrity, the SVOI Platform can be accessed also by the elderly who can use a mobile phone.

How e-queue makes government-to-citizen communication simpler and more transparent

SVOI Platform opens up unlimited opportunities for local governments to customise their solutions in order to better engage with their communities. One of such successfully launched services by a ASC in Chernomorsk City, Odessa Oblast is e-queue, or the ability to register an appointment with a local ASC online.

In Chernomorsk, just like in many other Ukrainian cities and villages, citizens would typically need to register their appointments for administrative services in person. The process was lengthy, inconvenient, lacking transparency, and prone to corruption.

In May 2022, after the Covid 19 pandemic when all ASCs reopened, in Chornomorsk, the local ASC faced an influx of citizens interested in passport services, hence bringing about old challenges..

'There was high demand for passport services at times. Previously, to register for a queue in ASC, people had to call us. But we would require a passport ID in order to prevent local corruption, such as 'buying' a spot in a queue which was not uncommon. So people had to come to us to make an appointment,' comments Iryna Matsiievych, Head of Administrative Services Center in Chernomorsk.

'It is at this point that **EGAP introduced the e-queue solution to us**. Now, citizens register for their appointments through the e-queue from the comforts of their home without contacting an ASC administrator,' she says.

For ASC employees like Iryna and her colleagues the automation of administrative services and the innovative SVOI platform mean transparency, effectiveness, reduced opportunities for corruption and respect for ASC employees' rights.

Before the introduction of the e-queue in the Chernomorsk community, an individual could spend up to 30 minutes in the waiting area. Now, a client arrives at a designated time according to prior registration through the e-queue and comes to the administrator without waiting.

If a service is simple, a person is done at the ASC after 5-10 minutes. If a service requires filling out a complex application or processing a large number of documents (or given the individual complexity of a specific case, for example, mature age), the process may take up to 30 minutes.

The e-queue service is also about bridging the gap between the government and the people. Through the e-queue, citizens can register their individual appointments directly with municipal officials, says **Serhii Hunko**, Coordinator for Digital Transformation of Regions of the EGAP Program. He highlights that the e-queue service also allows for flexibility:

'The system has flexible settings. Our e-queue has an option of registering an individual appointment with municipal officials, such as heads of communities. It can also adjust available time slots based on the number of available personnel for specific services. Now, e-queue works as a system of pre-registration based on two week intervals. We are currently finalizing a new module that will allow us to manage the queue inside an administrative building.'

Speaking more broadly, Serhii Hunko notes that the uniqueness of the SVOI Platform is that it makes communication easier, for both ASC administrators and citizens. 'For communities, the **Platform is a one-stop-shop where all communication is conducted in one place**'.

In addition, Mr. Hunko explains the SVOI Platform simplifies not only communication but also website management:
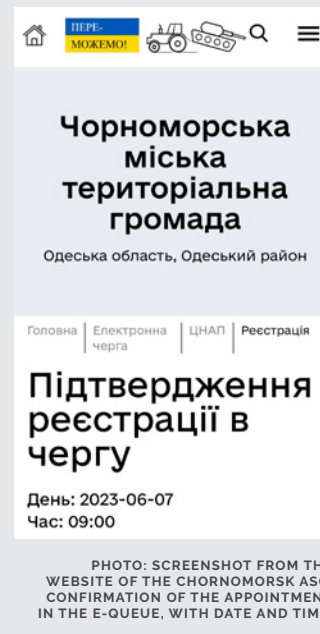
'In most cases, we simplified 70% of [communication] functions for community authorities who have very limited resources at their disposal. A vast amount of content [on the Platform] is generated automatically on the basis of national laws, so a community does not need to reinvent the wheel. It can just add its own local statutes. We put much effort into making it user-friendly. It is convenient and one does not need to be an expert to administer these functions.

The system of SVOI Platform is built on a principle of one back-end center where the community fills out their entry information on the administrative panel, such as, official contacts and addresses, and this information will automatically appear in all services, for example. It is important because if any information changes, one does not need to make respective changes on all the platforms.'

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Now, as many as 350 communities use the SVOI Platform, and 70 communities have adopted the e-queue service. For Ukraine, which is fighting against Russian aggression, digital solutions that foster local democracy, save time and human resources, and make people-to-government communication more seamless, are a milestone for success.