

## Article

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# Sustainable Development, Digital Democracy, and Open Government: Co-Creation Synergy in Ukraine

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**Abstract:** The article examines the interplay between the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), digital democracy, and open government in Ukraine in 2018 and 2020. The authors employ a mixed methods exploratory approach combining desk research with expert interviews. The study finds that during public consultations in Ukraine, the SDGs served as discussion themes, while the Open Government Partnership provided an executable platform. These e-consultations helped collect policy ideas, e-discussions facilitated policy drafting, and non-binding internet voting assisted in prioritising open government draft policies. The Agenda for Sustainable Development framework introduced policies with an education, youth, inclusion, and gender focus to open government. Public consultations increased awareness about the SDGs in Ukrainian civil society and prompted authorities to implement them. The combination of real-life, online, and hybrid consultation formats enabled elements of participatory, direct, and consensus democracy in post-revolutionary and pre-full-scale invasion Ukraine.

**Keywords:** sustainable development; digital democracy; open government; co-creation; Ukraine

## Introduction

Ukraine presents a notable case of combining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), open government, and digital technologies with synergy effects. After Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014, Ukraine saw a wave of

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reforms in the areas of good governance and democracy. According to Addink (2019) and Keping (2018), good governance involves principles and practices that promote transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in governmental decision-making. Addink also emphasises that, for governance to be “good”, it must be aligned with democratic values, allowing for genuine participation and partnership between citizens and the government.

This post-revolution reform period in Ukraine was reflected in the development of an SDG-related policy in 2016<sup>1</sup> and numerous e-democracy initiatives.<sup>2</sup> The first time a combination of sustainable development, open government, and digital democracy could be observed in Ukraine was in 2018. In that same year, the fourth national action plan of Ukraine’s Open Government Partnership was linked to the SDGs, which signalled the government’s commitment to delivering on global development priorities. The co-creation of this national action plan also involved multiple e-participation formats. During the co-creation of the fifth national action plan in 2020, which was characterised by both a newly elected government with a clear digital agenda and the COVID-19 pandemic, online discussions were organised around Agenda for Sustainable Development themes, too.<sup>3</sup> This shows that for two successive co-creation sessions for Ukraine’s national action plans, the SDGs, open government, and digital democracy came together.

After Russia’s hybrid warfare in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, the 2015 Minsk Agreements resulted in a ceasefire, allowing the Ukrainian government to focus on internal reforms, including open government. However, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched in February 2022, has also had a significant impact on the country’s open government process,<sup>4</sup> which was on hold until 2023.<sup>5</sup> Ukraine’s Open Government Partnership process still employed digital technologies for co-creation,<sup>6</sup> but with a less obvious connection to the SDGs. It goes without saying

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1 “Sustainable Development Goals: Ukraine. 2017 National Baseline Report.” Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of Ukraine. 2017. [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ua/SDGs\\_NationalReportEN\\_Web.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ua/SDGs_NationalReportEN_Web.pdf) (accessed 26 November 2024).

2 Khutkyy, Dmytro. “Lessons Learned: Co-Creation Developments in Ukraine.” Open Government Partnership. 3 March 2019. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/lessons-learned-co-creation-developments-in-ukraine/> (accessed 26 November 2024).

3 “Independent Reporting Mechanism. Action Plan Review: Ukraine 2021–2022.” Independent Reporting Mechanism. November 2021. [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Ukraine\\_Action-Plan-Review\\_2021-2022\\_EN.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Ukraine_Action-Plan-Review_2021-2022_EN.pdf) (accessed 26 November 2024).

4 “Independent Reporting Mechanism Results Report: Ukraine 2021–2022.”

5 “Ukraine Status Letter.” Open Government Partnership. 14 February 2023. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/ukraine-status-letter-february-2023/> (accessed 26 November 2024).

6 “Independent Reporting Mechanism Action Plan Review: Ukraine 2023–2025.” Independent Reporting Mechanism. July 2024. [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Ukraine\\_Action-Plan-Review\\_2023-2025\\_EN\\_for-public-comment.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Ukraine_Action-Plan-Review_2023-2025_EN_for-public-comment.pdf) (accessed 26 November 2024).

that the full-scale invasion brought new challenges and changed the country's priorities. These now include ensuring transparency of and participation in restoration processes, harmonisation with European Union legislation, and restoring access to information.<sup>7</sup> In sum, Ukraine's open government focus shifted from sustainable development to crisis response, resilience, and restoration. This makes Ukraine a noteworthy example of how sustainable development, open government, and digital technologies interacted in post-revolutionary, reformist, and relatively peaceful pre-full-scale invasion times, a development that was obviously interrupted in February 2022.

This article explores the links between the SDGs, open government, and digital democracy with a focus on the following research questions: What was the role of the Agenda for Sustainable Development framework in open government in Ukraine during the co-creation process in 2018–2020? What was the role of digital democracy in open government in Ukraine during this period? What were the connections between the SDGs, digital democracy, and open government in Ukraine before the pandemic hit?

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals were designed to align the efforts of national governments in the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>8</sup> While national governments are the key actors implementing and reporting on this ambitious global programme, it is promoted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), operating through its offices in individual countries. The Open Government Partnership is a good governance-focused international initiative. It unites the efforts of government and civil society to promote transparent, participatory, inclusive, and accountable governance.<sup>9</sup> According to the Open Government Partnership's methodology, government authorities are to co-create national action plans jointly with the public, partner with civil society organisations on their implementation, and report on the results.<sup>10</sup> This process is also monitored by the Open Government Partnership Secretariat and its Independent Reporting Mechanism which commissions evaluation reports or data collection from independent researchers and steers governments towards better practices of open government.

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7 "Independent Reporting Mechanism Action Plan Review: Ukraine 2023–2025."

8 "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." United Nations. 25 September 2015. <https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (accessed 26 November 2024).

9 "About Open Government Partnership." Open Government Partnership. 2022. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/about/> (accessed 26 November 2024).

10 "OGP National Handbook: Rules and Guidance for Participants." Open Government Partnership. March 2022. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/OGP-National-Handbook-2022.pdf> (accessed 26 November 2024).

Although the scope of the Agenda for Sustainable Development is broader than that of the Open Government Partnership, the mechanism for their enactment is similar in that it involves national governments adhering to regular reporting cycles and international organisations promoting and monitoring the SDGs and open government. Both initiatives have the potential for cross-fertilisation. First, the Sustainable Development Goals can broaden the Open Government Partnership's policy areas and enrich them by adding new sectoral foci. Second, since the Open Government Partnership mandate is similar to SDG 16 "Peace, justice and strong institutions" and SDG 17 "Partnerships for the goals", the Open Government Partnership can reinforce sustainable development efforts in these areas. Third, due to its emphasis on advanced technologies, the Open Government Partnership has a clear digital stance, which can also contribute to economic and environmental sustainability.

In the national action plan cycle, the most important stage shaping the 2-year reform plan is co-creation. During the period under study (2018–2020), the SDGs are expected to have been reflected in the agenda, digital tools to have been utilised for policy-making, and citizens and authorities to have cooperated and defined partnerships for further implementation. Therefore, this article explores the interplay between the SDGs, digital democracy, and open government during the co-creation process for the Open Government Partnership in the case of Ukraine. We analyse previous studies on the links between sustainable development, digital democracy, and open government, outline our conceptual framework, detail the research methodology, present our research findings on the SDGs, digital democracy tools, and open government in Ukraine in 2018 and 2020, as well as cumulatively.

## Previous Studies

The challenge of achieving sustainable development in all spheres of public management, as well as in the social and economic life of societies, is widely recognised. These spheres are generalised to three relevant dimensions: the interaction between culture, structure, and technology; approaches to optimisation, improvement, and renewal; and the parties involved in these processes (Jansen 2003). To set the direction for addressing these issues for all countries, the report on sustainable development outlines three key interconnected principles: environmental efficiency; intergenerational and intragenerational social justice; and participation in decision-making.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, the willingness and ability of governments to

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<sup>11</sup> "Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future." UN. Secretary-General and World Commission on Environment and Development. October 1987.

incorporate a strategic vision of complex sustainable development in their decision-making practices contribute to synchronising multiple goals pursued by multiple stakeholders (Singh et al. 2022). This, in turn, creates the capacity to consider the systemic effects of policies and actions for translating knowledge on SDG interactions into practice (Barquet et al. 2022). Addressing worldwide challenges requires shifting the focus of attention from individual demand to collective needs and values (Matveieva et al. 2022), which are based on a collective understanding of anthropogenic impacts on ecosystems (Mensah 2019) and societies (Pfajfar et al. 2022). This requires the “smartisation” of existing managerial practices and public policies for a more sustainable common future.

Digital transformation can be viewed as a cross-cutting target across the SDGs. The rationale is that it increases possibilities for greater equity and social inclusion (Estevez and Janowski 2013). Specifically, SDG 16 which aims to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” is linked with digitalisation (Misuraca et al. 2021). Digital transformation enables the integrated achievement of the SDGs (Corbett and Mellouli 2017; Medaglia and Damsgaard 2020; Nishant et al. 2020), contributing to governmental openness and broad public participation in decision-making.

Public transparency is often seen as the cornerstone of open government and digital democracy. Here, accessible public data and information are seen as the lowest level of abstraction from which information and then knowledge are derived by governments and societies, the “lifeblood of a robust democracy” (Ubaldi 2013, 5). Thus, accessible information in the public sector is an important foundation for sustaining good governance and stimulating knowledge-driven environmental protection, as well as social and economic growth (Ubaldi 2013). Other scholars define the openness of public data and openness of government in general as “the extent to which citizens can monitor and influence government processes through access to government information and access to decision-making arenas” (Meijer et al. 2012, 13). The methods for such monitoring have been described within the context of digital transformation, which is associated with shared values of openness, transparency, accessibility, and accountability (Wijnhoven et al. 2015). Digitalisation is also associated with the achievement of positive outcomes by means of AI initiatives in the public sector, proposing specific mechanisms that cut across the organisational, individual, and innovation contexts of public management (Attard et al. 2015).

Civic participation is the opposite, the grassroots side of the interaction between the citizens and the authorities within the open government and digital democracy conceptual frameworks alike. Advocates of the open government approach to digital transformation argue that with the new possibilities of online communication in inclusive societies, citizens can engage more actively in democratic decision-making and public administration than ever before (di Gennaro 2006; Hilgers 2012; Lathrop and Ruma 2010). At the same time, the digital transformation changes government practices while highlighting two dimensions of the government's openness: vision or transparency through access to information, and voice or participation through access to decision-making arenas (Curtin and Mendes 2011; Meijer et al. 2012).<sup>12</sup>

The technical dimension of the digital transformation of governments and societies is widely described in the context of introducing platforms for communication between citizens and authorities, as well as intergovernmental data exchange. Digital platforms make it easier for people to articulate opinions and interact with the government, increasing the acceptance of political decisions, as their users can better understand who and how many people support a decision (Meijer et al. 2012). Using such platforms also increases public trust in the government (Berman 1997; Heckmann 2011). Thus, open data platforms, constructed collectively by public administrators and citizens, could foster monitorial, deliberative, and participatory democratic processes (Wijnhoven et al. 2015; Ruijter et al. 2017).

As the literature reveals, government openness in digital form is believed to unlock the potential of reorganising managerial practices more sustainably, aiming at achieving sustainability of intersectoral development. Civil society and public administration are moving towards the digitalisation and smartisation of traditional practices and approaches of decision-making with a view to achieving sustainable development. This brings advantages for citizens and inclusive societies as well as for the sustainable development of human capital. Therefore, our study demonstrates even stronger links, specifically between the SDGs, digital democracy, and open government in the case of the co-creation process for Ukraine's Open Government Partnership.

## Conceptual Framework

Participatory governance refers to the creation of intermediary spaces that redefine the boundaries between the state and its citizens, facilitating new forms of

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12 Khutkyy, Dmytro. "Development Agenda: Aspirations of Governments and Citizens. Opinion Brief." University of Helsinki. 8 June 2019. <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/302813> (accessed 30 November 2024).

engagement between them, as described by Fischer (2006). According to Newig et al. (2019), this concept includes all processes and structures of public decision-making that involve actors from the private sector, civil society, and the public, with varying degrees of communication, collaboration, and delegation of decision-making power. Participatory governance institutionalises interactions between government and civil society, forming new patterns of collaboration.

However, participatory governance differs from collaborative governance, which primarily focuses on inter- and intra-organisational coordination. Almost 20 years ago now, Fung (2006) pointed out that participatory governance is composed of a wide variety of structures and processes, providing multiple institutional settings for citizen participation. Participatory governance, as noted by Newig et al. (2019), places greater emphasis on engaging citizens, including both organised and non-organised actors who are not normally charged with decision-making. Esposito et al. (2023) argue that the design and conditions of governmental arrangements can either facilitate or hinder participatory decision-making. They emphasise that both the structural and agentic features of participatory governance play critical roles in shaping its effectiveness, making flexibility and inclusiveness key components of success in this context.

Co-creation, being closely linked to participatory governance, involves collaboration and innovative problem-solving among stakeholders across all phases of an initiative, from problem identification to evaluation (Brandsen and Honingh 2018; Messiha et al. 2023). Co-creation broadens the range of participants, including lay actors, and shifts the focus towards creative problem-solving and democratic decision-making (Ansell and Torfing 2021).

This discussion becomes particularly relevant when considering the adaptation of SDGs within the sociopolitical discourse of young and fragile democracies, such as Ukraine. Participatory governance, along with co-creation practices, plays a critical role in shaping inclusive, democratic policy-making. By involving a wide range of actors in decision-making processes, these practices can help integrate the SDGs into the governance framework, supporting sustainable development and reinforcing democratic principles. From this perspective, the UN's SDGs represent, as we show in the following, a transformative vision for governance, aiming not only at social and economic improvement but also at establishing inclusive, transparent, and accountable governance frameworks. Sustainable Development Goal 16 ("Peace, justice, and strong institutions") and 17 ("Partnerships for the goals") are particularly pertinent to open government initiatives. These Goals promote institutional transparency and cooperation between government and civil society, which are fundamental principles of both digital democracy and open government (Meijer et al. 2012). The SDGs can thus be viewed not merely as global development objectives but

as enablers of new governance paradigms, fostering synergies between digital democracy and inclusive co-creation.

Regarding the vision of SDGs, we rely on the United Nations's official wording. The UN refers to the SDGs as a "comprehensive, far-reaching and people-centred set of universal and transformative goals and targets" for a "better future for all people", which were adopted by heads of state and government of 193 countries in global solidarity. In the context of this study, the most relevant are SDG 16 "Peace, justice and strong institutions", meaning the solidarity of governments in a strategic vision to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels" and SDG 17 "Partnerships to achieve the goal", or in more concrete terms to "strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development".<sup>13</sup>

For the purposes of this study, we use an academic definition of digital democracy combined with some practical definitions of its different formats. It is viewed as the collective use of information and communication technology for political and democratic practices in both online and offline environments (van Dijk and Hacker 2018). This allows us to consider not only purely internet-based e-engagement by geographically dispersed citizens but also e-tools used by people gathered in one physical space. In this case study, the specific forms of digital democracy that are most relevant are e-consultation, e-discussion, and i-voting. E-consultation involves collecting the opinions of designated people or the public at large on a specific policy issue without necessarily mandating the decision-maker.<sup>14</sup> This is a broader concept, the more specific manifestation of which is the narrower "e-discussion", which comprises discussions of issues of concern to citizens with the participation of those very citizens, public authorities, and others using information and communication technologies (ICTs) and other e-democracy tools with the aim of fostering citizens' deliberation and participation in democracy.<sup>15</sup> This article also looks at the cases of internet voting (i-voting), defined as voting using ICTs at least for casting and counting votes.<sup>16</sup> Such a broad understanding embraces both online

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<sup>13</sup> "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." United Nations. 25 September 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Krimmer, Robert, and Manuel J. Kripp. "Indicative Guide No. 1 to Recommendation Rec (2009) 1 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on E-Democracy. Generic Tools and Policies for an Electronic Democracy." Council of Europe. Ad Hoc Committee on E-democracy. 15 January 2009. [https://www.coe.int/t/dgap/goodgovernance/Activities/CAHDE/2009/RecCM2009\\_1\\_and\\_Accomp\\_Docs/CAHDE\\_Indicative\\_Guides\\_and\\_Glossary\\_EN.asp](https://www.coe.int/t/dgap/goodgovernance/Activities/CAHDE/2009/RecCM2009_1_and_Accomp_Docs/CAHDE_Indicative_Guides_and_Glossary_EN.asp). (accessed 27 November 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Krimmer and Kripp. "Indicative Guide No. 1 to Recommendation Rec (2009) 1." 15 January 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Khutkyy, Dmytro. "Internet Voting: Challenges and Solutions. Policy Paper." European Digital Development Alliance. August 2020.

voting and mobile voting. It also allows us to go beyond internet elections and examine binding and non-binding digital voting for policies in Ukraine.

In relation to open government, we use the perspective employed in the Open Government Partnership handbook itself.<sup>17</sup> The handbook states that open government is more transparent, inclusive, participatory, and accountable to citizens due to the collaboration between the government, civil society, and other stakeholders which benefits everyone. The handbook further describes transparency as the publication of all government-held information, proactive or reactive releases of information, mechanisms to strengthen the right to information, and open access to government information. It defines accountability as the rules, regulations, and mechanisms in place that call upon government actors to justify their actions, act upon criticisms directed at or requirements made of them, and to accept responsibility for failure to respect laws or commitments. Another central term is participation. This is described as occurring when governments seek to mobilise citizens to engage in a dialogue on government policies or programmes, provide input or feedback, and make contributions that lead to more responsive, innovative, and effective governance. Lastly, the handbook states that the co-creation process allows any interested stakeholders – citizens, civil society organisations, government departments, subnational governments, parliament, academics, the private sector, etc. – to provide ideas and feedback, identify priorities, and propose commitments for the Open Government Partnership action plan. As interpreted by Piotrowski et al. (2022), this system is designed such that it features flexibility and weak enforcement in exchange for participation and iterative discussion. In light of this, our inquiry inspects how the Sustainable Development Goals and digital democracy tools have affected Ukrainian civil society, authorities, and the entire open government system.

## Research Methodology

To compare the diverse links between the Sustainable Development Goals, digital democratic formats, and open government, in our case study we adopt a mixed methods approach and exploratory strategy. In line with the mixed methods design, particular attention is given to qualitative methods, such as those articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), who emphasise the importance of thematic analysis as a flexible and rich method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data. This approach is particularly valuable for exploring the nuanced intersections of the SDGs, digital democracy, and open government in a fragile context such as

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17 “OGP National Handbook: Rules and Guidance for Participants.” March 2022.

post-Maidan Ukraine. Our manual content analysis ensures the inclusion of diverse perspectives and the identification of key themes related to participatory governance, digital inclusion, and policy co-creation.

First, we analysed the available textual evidence regarding the Open Government Partnership co-creation process in Ukraine in 2018 and 2020. The relevant reports published by the UNDP, the Independent Reporting Mechanism, and other organisations were examined for indications of the influence of the SDGs and digital tools on open government. Furthermore, we conducted a policy analysis of the relevant official Ukrainian government documents with a specific focus on the content of Open Government Partnership national action plans as well as those resulting from the co-creation process. Moreover, we scrutinised invitations to and minutes from Zoom web conferencing meetings as well as forum discussions and voting results on the e-platform *Discuto* – the digital tool utilised for co-creation. A total of 1,316 pages of documents were analysed. Our manual qualitative content analysis identified the themes proposed, discussed, and voted on online, while our quantitative calculations assess the scale of deliberation and vote casting.

Second, we reached out to expert-level stakeholders from the public and the government who were well-informed about the 2018 and 2020 co-creation campaigns in Ukraine. Specific selection criteria included direct involvement in or solid knowledge about the application of the Agenda for Sustainable Development framework or digital democracy instruments for developing the respective national action plans. To achieve a multifaceted stakeholder perspective on the role of the SDGs and digital tools in the Open Government Partnership co-creation process, we approached independent experts, civic activists, specialists from development programmes, and government officials we assumed were aware of the process and outcomes of the process in Ukraine. The potential sample comprised specialists from the UNDP Ukraine, that is the intergovernmental organisation that promoted the SDGs and was one of the coordinators the co-creation activities, members of the Coordination Council, which is the joint civic-public entity responsible for implementing the Open Government Partnership in Ukraine, as well as other participants involved in the development of the national action plan and in possession of the necessary expertise. Prospective informants were chosen from the Coordination Council lists found on government websites (purposeful sampling) and based on references made by interviewees (snowball technique).

We approached 18 people and with a 66 % response rate were able to conduct 12 interviews (Table 1). Two informants were government officials from the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, one was a civic activist, six were development programme specialists from the UNDP Ukraine, and three were independent experts. The fieldwork was conducted from 17 June to 12 December 2022. Given the narrow topic of this case study as well as the richness and cross-confirmation of the data we

**Table 1:** Interview Overview.

N	Referencing permission	Interviewee name	Informant role	Sampling method	Interview date	Interview format	Record type
1	by name	Olena Ursu	development specialist	purposeful	17 June 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript
2	by name	Oleksandr Ryzhenko	independent expert	purposeful	21 June 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript
3	by name	Natalia Oksha	government official	purposeful	21 June 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript
4	by name	Anna Pakhno	government official	purposeful	21 June 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript
5	by name	Oksana Prykhodko	civic activist	purposeful	23 June 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript
6	by name	Oksana Khomei	independent expert	purposeful	28 June 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript
7	by name	Oleksii Kovalenko	development specialist	purposeful	28 June 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript
8	by name	Iuliia Kaplan	independent expert	purposeful	30 June 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript
9	by name	Oksana Grechko	development specialist	purposeful	30 June 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript
10	by name	Anna Ostriko	development specialist	snowball	07 December 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript
11	by name	Oksana Kosenko	development specialist	snowball	07 December 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript
12	by name	Nazar Grom	development specialist	snowball	12 December 2022	online via Zoom	audio, transcript

obtained, the resulting sample proved to be sufficient. The expert interviews were performed online via Zoom in a semi-structured format. All respondents granted informed consent for us to audio-record, transcribe, and cite their answers in publications. Such transparency is a notable feature of the Ukrainian civil society and international development project sectors, which has remained highly visible even during wartime. On average, the interviews lasted for 30 minutes. Although this seems rather short, in the context of electricity blackouts, internet interruptions, and the overall pressure experienced in war-torn Ukraine, this was in fact a satisfactory result. When the interviewees requested to view and authorise their quotes, the relevant draft citations for the paper were shared, enabling them to verify that the text accurately reflected what they had expressed. Interview questions and

transcripts were structured and coded based on three themes: the role of informants in the development of the Open Government Partnership national action plan, the design and implementation of the co-creation process, and the influence of the SDGs and digital technologies on open government (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Interview Guide.

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### **Introduction**

- Thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview. Should I tell you a bit more about this project, or should we go straight to the questions? [If the respondent requests more information, explain research objectives in accessible language.]

### **Informed consent**

- To convey your thoughts more accurately, may I make an audio-video recording of our conversation? [If the respondent objects – would it be okay to at least take notes?]
- In line with the principles of open science, may I make a literal transcript of our interview and save it in secure cloud storage? [If the respondent objects – may I at least share my notes with my co-author?]
- To increase the credibility of the research results, may I refer to you using your name and place of work? [If the respondent objects – may I at least refer to your overall role in the Open Government Partnership process (e.g. civic activist, independent expert, government official, employee of an international organisation, researcher, etc.)?]

### **Relevant experience**

- What is your professional affiliation? Is it [position and place of work from the list of respondents]?
- What is your role in the co-creation process for the Open Government Partnership action plan in Ukraine in 2018 and 2020? [Specify if the question is unclear: civic activist, independent expert, government official, employee of an international organisation, researcher]

### **Clarification of the Open Government Partnership action plan development process**

- To the best of your knowledge, how were Open Government Partnership national action plans developed in Ukraine in 2018 and 2020? [If the respondent needs clarification, specify. Who took part in the activities? How exactly did the discussion and voting take place? How exactly were the results taken into account when drafting commitments?]
- What is the source of your knowledge on this? [If the respondent asks to clarify, rephrase: How do you know about these activities?]

### **Clarification of the impact of the Sustainable Development Goals and digital democracy on the Open Government Partnership action plans**

- In your opinion, did the discussion on the Sustainable Development Goals for the Open Government Partnership action plan have any impact on the participants? [Only if the response is “yes”, ask: What was the impact, specifically?]
- Has the discussion on the Sustainable Development Goals influenced non-governmental organisations? [Only if the response is “yes”, ask: How specifically?]
- Has the discussion on the Sustainable Development Goals influenced public authorities? [Only if the response is “yes”, ask: How specifically?]
- Did the discussion on the Sustainable Development Goals have any impact on open government in Ukraine as a whole? [Only if the response is “yes”, ask: What was the impact, specifically?]
- How did the voting for open government priorities relate to the Sustainable Development Goals at the 2018 “world café” event?

**Table 2:** (continued)

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**Reasons for the impact of the Sustainable Development Goals and digital democracy**

- From your point of view, why has incorporating the Sustainable Development Goals and voting for open government priorities had such an impact on open government?

**Additional reflections**

- Do you have any other remarks that you consider important for understanding the role of the Sustainable Development Goals in the development of the Open Government Partnership action plan in Ukraine in 2018 and 2020?

**Further informants**

- Could you please recommend other civil society activists, independent experts, government officials, employees of international organisations, or researchers who are aware of the Sustainable Development Goals and the development of the Open Government Partnership action plan in Ukraine in 2018 and 2020?

**Final remarks**

- Thank you very much for the interview!
  - We will analyse all the information gathered and will send you the article when it has been published.
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Third, we compared data from various sources to cross-validate our findings. When interviewees' opinions aligned with official texts, these were presented as robust. If there was a discrepancy, the information from the formal sources was presented due to the higher probability of this being accurate. In situations where no objective data was available, but rather only contradicting views, those on which most informants agreed were used as primary views, but alternative standpoints were cited too. This allowed us to create a picture of the interrelationship between the SDGs, digital tools, and open government in Ukraine's Open Government Partnership process that was both accurate and multidimensional at the same time.

The limitations of this research include context-specific challenges, data constraints in a rapidly evolving digital infrastructure, and the impact of the crisis situation. The political and social context of post-Euromaidan and pre-full-scale invasion Ukraine may limit the generalisability of our findings. However, it is precisely because of its contingent situation that Ukraine presents an insightful case. We concede that while our study relies on desk research, content analysis, and expert interviews, the scope of expert perspectives – twelve interviews – is only representative of the diverse civil society organisations and government agencies to a limited extent. Also, given that digital democracy continues to evolve, some of our findings may become outdated quite soon. Lastly, since Russia's full-scale invasion has shifted the focus of Ukraine's open government agenda, our pre-crisis findings provide insights that obviously do not reflect the challenges and adjustments made during wartime. It remains for future research to examine how crisis conditions impact the sustainability and scalability of the frameworks discussed here.

## Ukraine's Public Policy Developments

It took several years for open government, digital democracy, and the SDGs in Ukraine to converge (Table 3). Ukraine has been participating in the Open Government Partnership since 2011 and during this time, it has developed six and implemented five national action plans within its framework.<sup>18</sup> Open Government Partnership policy areas include anticorruption and integrity, civic space, digital governance, fiscal openness, inclusion, justice, natural resources, open parliaments, public service delivery, and the right to information.<sup>19</sup> Although there is some overlap with the SDGs, clearly the Open Government Partnership agenda is more focused on good governance. Ukraine's 2012–2013, 2014–2015, and 2016–2018 national action plans concentrated on anticorruption, public participation, access to information, improved administrative services, e-governance, and e-democracy.<sup>20</sup> Ukraine had some experience of e-participation before, but there was a burst of e-democracy activities after Euromaidan in 2014 (Khutkyy 2019a, 2019b). In 2019, the professional discourse shifted from e-government and e-democracy to the overarching concept of digital transformation.

Following the United Nations's adoption of the SDGs in 2015, the Ukrainian government started developing its own Sustainable Development Goals policy in 2016 and published the respective national baseline report in 2017.<sup>21</sup> The report captured the situation in Ukraine regarding all 17 SDGs. However, the Institute for Social and Economic Research, a civil society organisation, published a similar report, revealing that in practice, the level of integration of the SDGs into Ukraine's national policies varied from 13 % to 87 %, and some targets were missing completely.<sup>22</sup> In this context, the development of Open Government Partnership national action plans effectively

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18 "Ukraine." Open Government Partnership. 2022. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/ukraine/> (accessed 26 November 2024).

19 "Policy Areas." Open Government Partnership. 2022. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/policy-areas/#all> (accessed 26 November 2024).

20 Presniakov, Ivan. "Independent Reporting Mechanism Ukraine: Progress Report 2012–13." 2015. [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Ukraine\\_IRM\\_Report\\_public\\_comment\\_version\\_Eng.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Ukraine_IRM_Report_public_comment_version_Eng.pdf) (accessed 26 November 2024); Kotliar, Dmytro. "Mekhanizm Neza-lezhnoho Zvituvannia (MNZ): Ukraina, Zvit Za 2014–2015." 2016. Independent Reporting Mechanism. [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/OG\\_UkraineReport\\_2016\\_final\\_print\\_0\\_0.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/OG_UkraineReport_2016_final_print_0_0.pdf) (accessed 26 November 2024); IRM and Dmytro Khutkyy. "Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM): Ukraine Design Report 2018–2020." Independent Reporting Mechanism. 2020. [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Ukraine\\_Design-Report\\_2018-2020\\_EN.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Ukraine_Design-Report_2018-2020_EN.pdf) (accessed 26 November 2024).

21 "Sustainable Development Goals: Ukraine. 2017 National Baseline Report." Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of Ukraine. 2017.

22 "Implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in Ukraine: Analysis of Government Strategies and Public Policy: Executive Summary of the Analytical Study." Institute for Social and

**Table 3:** Timeline of Main Relevant Events.

Years	Developments
2011	Ukraine joined Open Government Partnership
2013	Euromaidan
2014	Revolution of Dignity Russia's hybrid warfare in Crimea and eastern Ukraine
2015	United Nations adopted Sustainable Development Goals
2016	Ukraine's government started developing its Sustainable Development Goals policy
2017	Ukraine's government published a Sustainable Development Goals report
2018	Co-creation of Ukraine's fourth Open Government Partnership national action plan
2018–2020	Realisation of Ukraine's fourth Open Government Partnership national action plan
2020	Co-creation of Ukraine's fifth Open Government Partnership national action plan
2021–2022	Realisation of Ukraine's fifth Open Government Partnership national action plan
2022	Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine Ukraine granted European Union candidate status
2023	Co-creation of Ukraine's sixth Open Government Partnership national action plan
2023–2025	Realisation of Ukraine's sixth Open Government Partnership national action plan

combined open government policy areas, digital democracy formats, and the Agenda for Sustainable Development. While the first Open Government Partnership co-creation process in 2012 relied on offline consultations only, just two years later in 2014 Ukraine introduced the first e-consultations for the Open Government Partnership process, reinforcing them with online voting in 2016, and further strengthening them with the SDG framework in 2018.<sup>23</sup> In 2020, the development of the new national action plan included thematic online discussions organised around the SDGs.<sup>24</sup> The specific mechanisms that linked the SDGs, digital democracy, and open government are examined in the following subsections.

## Patterns in the Co-Creation of Ukraine's 2018 Open Government Partnership

The development of Ukraine's fourth national action plan included a wide range of (e-)consultation activities. In the first half of 2018, in its regional civil society

Economic Research. 12 October 2017. [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ua/RIA\\_eng\\_270917.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/ua/RIA_eng_270917.pdf) (accessed 26 November 2024).

<sup>23</sup> Khutkyy, Dmytro. "Lessons Learned: Co-Creation Developments in Ukraine." Open Government Partnership. 3 March 2019.

<sup>24</sup> "Independent Reporting Mechanism. Action Plan Review: Ukraine 2021–2022."

organisation hubs, the UNDP Ukraine organised 20 public events engaging over 800 participants.<sup>25</sup> As one co-organiser acknowledged, this was a successful effort to deliberate on the national action plan not only with strong civil society organisations but with a wider public.<sup>26</sup> Further, on 12 April 2018, in Kyiv, the Coordination Council organised a “world café” public discussion with around 100 participants from government and civil society, facilitated and summed up by regional civic activists.<sup>27</sup> The participants of the “world café” event discussed the open government agenda and participated in an interactive poll.<sup>28</sup> Civil servants who co-organised the event clarified that the purpose of the i-voting was to help prioritise the SDGs for the subsequent on-site discussion.<sup>29</sup> In addition, on 7 May 2018, during an Open Government Partnership week in Ukraine, the public was able to provide input on the draft national action plan.<sup>30</sup> In sum, over 150 submissions were collected via e-mail and offline events. These inputs were further processed by the Coordination Council and the expert community in a series of offline and online discussions. The report stated that on 10 May 2018, the Coordination Council had held discussions with the participating stakeholders at an online live-streamed video conference and on 29 May 2018, the Coordination Council conducted an in-person meeting with representatives of the authorities and civil society to discuss draft national action plan commitments. As a result, the Coordination Council consolidated 24 draft commitments and put them to public i-voting. During the period 7–20 July 2018, a dedicated webpage on the Discuto online platform hosted an e-discussion and i-voting on draft commitments, where 262 platform users made 37 comments and cast 2,712 votes.<sup>31</sup> On 4 October 2018, the Coordination Council presented the full draft national action plan to the authorities, civil society organisations, international development organisations, and other stakeholders who committed to implementing the activities contained in the national action plan. This was followed by several rounds of comments and revisions of the draft plan which was circulated among

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25 IRM and Khutkyy. “Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM): Ukraine Design Report 2018–2020.”

26 Interview with Iuliia Kaplan, online, 30 November 2022.

27 IRM and Khutkyy. “Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM): Ukraine Design Report 2018–2020.”

28 “Action Plan on Implementation of the Open Government Partnership Initiative in 2018–2020.” Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 3 January 2019. [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Ukraine\\_Action-Plan\\_2018-2020\\_EN.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Ukraine_Action-Plan_2018-2020_EN.pdf) (accessed 26 November 2024).

29 Interview with Natalia Oksha, online, 21 June 2022; Interview with Anna Pakhno, online, 21 June 2022.

30 IRM and Khutkyy. “Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM): Ukraine Design Report 2018–2020.” 2020.

31 OGP Ukraine. “Obhovorennia Propozytsiy Do Planu Diy Iz Do Planu Diy Iz Vprovadzhenia Initsyatyvy ‘Partnerstvo ‘Vidkrytyi Uriad’ u 2016–2018 Rokah.” *Discuto*. 20 July 2018. <https://www.discuto.io/en/consultation/33009> (accessed 26 November 2024).

central government agencies and civil society partner organisations.<sup>32</sup> On 18 December 2018, the government adopted Ukraine's fourth national action plan.<sup>33</sup>

These in-person and online consultation formats facilitated policy-making discussions and served as an impetus for prioritising policy commitments. As a member of staff from an international organisation explained, the government was aware of the role of i-voting in the Open Government Partnership process.<sup>34</sup> The popular vote influenced the definitive version of the national action plan.<sup>35</sup> In comparison to previous national action plans, the fourth employed the widest spectrum of participatory methods, including interactive mobile voting on specific themes during a workshop and an online discussion and e-voting for priorities on the Discuto platform.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the cited author stated that the fourth co-creation process involved a wider variety of groups, such as those working on women's empowerment, while the UNDP Ukraine hubs facilitated public engagement in those regions of Ukraine that attracted the highest number of participants in the Open Government Partnership Ukraine's co-creation consultations. As a result, as concluded by the Independent Reporting Mechanism, Ukraine's Open Government Partnership co-creation process reached a "collaborate" level of public influence on the content of the action plan, with an iterative dialogue between the public and the government with the public helping to set the agenda.<sup>37</sup> This reflects a high degree of civil society empowerment equipped with traditional and digital channels affecting open government public policy.

Not only did digital democracy tools serve as intermediaries between the different stakeholders involved in the co-creation of policies, but they also became an end in themselves. Ukraine's fourth national action plan mandated "setting up a unified online platform for interaction between executive bodies and civil society organisations".<sup>38</sup> This occurred for several reasons. First, the Open Government Partnership agenda encouraged supporting civic participation using innovative technologies. Second, this attracted e-participation enthusiasts to the Open Government Partnership co-creation process. Third, the use of e-discussions and i-voting for setting up the agenda, drafting, and prioritising Open Government Partnership policies led to the

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32 IRM and Khutkyy. "Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM): Ukraine Design Report 2018–2020."

33 "Rozporiadzhennia Vid 18 Hrudnia 2018 r. N 1088-r." Kabinet Ministriv Ukrainy. 18 December 2018. [https://www.kmu.gov.ua/storage/app/sites/1/17-civik-2018/partnerstvo/plan\\_2018%20-%202020.pdf](https://www.kmu.gov.ua/storage/app/sites/1/17-civik-2018/partnerstvo/plan_2018%20-%202020.pdf) (accessed 26 November 2024).

34 Interview with Olena Ursu, online, 17 June 2022.

35 Interview with Iuliia Kaplan, online, 30 November 2022.

36 Khutkyy. "Lessons Learned: Co-Creation Developments in Ukraine." Open Government Partnership. 3 March 2019.

37 IRM and Khutkyy. "Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM): Ukraine Design Report 2018–2020."

38 "Action Plan on Implementation of the Open Government Partnership Initiative in 2018–2020." Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 3 January 2019.

idea of scaling up such e-consultations to cover a wider range of interaction formats between the citizens and the authorities. One informant joined Ukraine's Open Government Partnership process to develop this online platform.<sup>39</sup>

During the 2018 Open Government Partnership co-creation process in Ukraine, the SDGs were streamlined and partially shaped the open government agenda, expanding it to encompass the Agenda for Sustainable Development theme. This was as a result of the leading role played by the UNDP Ukraine in co-organising offline discussions in its regional hubs and the capital. Multiple experts recognised its role in co-organising public discussions around the Open Government Partnership national action plan.<sup>40</sup> In this context, the UNDP emphasised the importance of the Agenda for Sustainable Development and structuring discussions around the SDGs. As one expert confirmed, all Open Government Partnership draft commitments were organised around the SDGs.<sup>41</sup> This channelled participants' attention towards the SDGs and encouraged them to brainstorm on how to advance the areas that were still underdeveloped in Ukraine according to Agenda for Sustainable Development standards. As stated by a co-head of the Coordination Council, the i-voting for priority SDGs at the "world café" event had an impact on open government since it defined the list of topics for further discussion.<sup>42</sup>

As a consequence, for the first time in the history of the Open Government Partnership Ukraine, the country's fourth national action plan, for 2018–2020, contained three education-focused commitments. These were commitment 15 "Providing school children, parents and educators with cutting-edge education electronic resources and services", commitment 16 "Enabling online verification of education certificates", and commitment 17 "Ensuring free access of users to the National Repository of Academic Texts".<sup>43</sup> These two commitments or policies are clearly associated with SDG 4 "Quality education". Although these new themes constituted only slightly more than 17 % of the total 17 commitments in the fourth national action plan, they represented a substantial advancement. The reason for this is that traditionally, the majority of Open Government Partnership commitments in Ukraine were focused on anticorruption, public participation, access to information, improved administrative services, e-governance, and e-democracy efforts. Thus, broadening the thematic scope by incorporating the SDGs and making them part of this governmental decree was a significant policy change.

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39 Interview with Oksana Prykhodko, online, 23 June 2022.

40 Interview with Oksana Grechko, online, 30 November 2022; Interview with Iuliia Kaplan, online, 30 November 2022; Interview with Oksana Khomei, online, 28 November 2022.

41 Interview with Oksana Khomei, online, 28 November 2022.

42 Interview with Natalia Oksha, online, 21 June 2022.

43 "Action Plan on Implementation of the Open Government Partnership Initiative in 2018–2020." Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 3 January 2019.

## Patterns in the Co-Creation of Ukraine's 2020 Open Government Partnership

Due to the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, the development of Ukraine's 2020 national action plan took place online. The government reported holding public e-consultations from February to July 2020, collecting online inputs from the public both consistent with the UN's SDGs and with the four main principles of the Open Government Partnership, these being: ensuring access to public information; increasing public participation in decision-making; ensuring the accountability of public authorities; and developing technologies and innovations for ensuring transparency and accountability.<sup>44</sup> There was indeed a Google Form for submissions.<sup>45</sup> The government also reported that from April to July 2020, 17 thematic public discussions were held in the context of the global SDGs, with the participation of stakeholders from civil society institutions and the expert community, as well as local self-governing bodies.<sup>46</sup> In addition, there were separate online events with young people and the authorities. The government further specified that during these events, suggestions for the national action plan were formulated in two stages: the participants first identified problematic issues in the relevant areas and then sought to resolve the issues in question. As identified by the Independent Reporting Mechanism, an ad hoc multi-stakeholder oversight group received 241 proposals during online thematic meetings and via an electronic form, evaluated them, and published feedback, and also prepared a draft action plan which was put out for public consultation.<sup>47</sup> On 24 February 2021, the government adopted Ukraine's fifth national action plan.<sup>48</sup>

Although the range of e-consultation formats was narrower for this action plan, there were several focused thematic discussions which had the effect of improving the quality of deliberations. For example, one expert acknowledged the value of an

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44 "Action Plan for the Implementation of the Open Government Partnership Initiative, 2021–2022." Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 24 August 2021. [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ukraine\\_Action-Plan\\_2020-2022\\_EN.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ukraine_Action-Plan_2020-2022_EN.pdf) (accessed 26 November 2024).

45 OGP Ukraine. "Propozytsii Do Planu Dii Iz Vprovadzhennia Initsiatyvy "Partnerstvo 'Vidkrytyi Uriad'" u 2021–2022 Rokah." *Google Forms*. 2022. [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQL-Se0U9vRRxYPi3FE2vYsB5e0hivtJA\\_nSVv0JvMMPkVW4I3QtQ/closedform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQL-Se0U9vRRxYPi3FE2vYsB5e0hivtJA_nSVv0JvMMPkVW4I3QtQ/closedform) (accessed 28 December 2022).

46 "Action Plan for the Implementation of the Open Government Partnership Initiative, 2021–2022." Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 24 August 2021.

47 "Independent Reporting Mechanism. Action Plan Review: Ukraine 2021–2022."

48 "Rozporiadzhennia Vid 24 Liutoho 2021 r. N 149-r." Kabinet Ministriv Ukrainy. 24 February 2021. <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/npas/pro-zatverdzhennya-planu-dij-iz-vprovadzhennya-iniciativi-partnerstvo-vidkritij-uryad-u-20212022-t240221> (accessed 26 November 2024).

innovative technique used for an e-discussion.<sup>49</sup> According to the Independent Reporting Mechanism, online consultations led to a wider range of participating civil society organisations, including organisations based outside Kyiv, which meant the national action plan covered a greater diversity of thematic areas plan.<sup>50</sup> Thereby, fewer people participated in the co-creation of the fifth national action plan than in the fourth, but the process concentrated more on sectoral e-discussions relying on expertise from stakeholders from both the capital and the regions.

As in 2018, the 2020 co-creation process increased the number of instruments of digital democracy used, from mediators to policy objectives. Ukraine's fifth national action plan committed to "Ensuring application of e-democracy instruments in interactions between executive authorities, the public, and the civil society institutions".<sup>51</sup> The description of the milestones for the commitment to "e-democracy instruments" in the fifth national action plan seems similar to the one in the fourth plan which was to facilitate "interaction between executive bodies and civil society organisations". Yet, there is a difference. The commitment in the fourth edition specified that the online platform was to include "public consultations, participation in consultations, and the collection of information on the implementation of the Open Government Partnership on a single resource".<sup>52</sup> The commitment in the fifth national action plan, however, expanded the functionality of the online platform to include "modules for the public to submit e-petitions, requests for public information, voting on the composition of public councils in executive bodies, and holding e-consultations and e-polling".<sup>53</sup> One informant spoke about the connection between the discussion arranged by the Open Government Partnership on introducing i-voting to elect members of civic councils and the government's commitment to developing an online platform for electronic democracy.<sup>54</sup>

During the 2020 Open Government Partnership co-creation in Ukraine, the SDGs were closely linked to the Open Government Partnership policy areas, resulting in an explicitly blended sustainable development/open government agenda that firmly structured public consultations and further extended the open government agenda to include new Agenda for Sustainable Development themes. According to e-mails

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49 Interview with Oleksii Kovalenko, online, 28 November 2022.

50 "Independent Reporting Mechanism. Action Plan Review: Ukraine 2021–2022."

51 "Action Plan for the Implementation of the Open Government Partnership Initiative, 2021–2022." Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 24 August 2021. [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ukraine\\_Action-Plan\\_2020-2022\\_EN.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Ukraine_Action-Plan_2020-2022_EN.pdf) (accessed 30 November 2024).

52 "Action Plan on Implementation of the Open Government Partnership Initiative in 2018–2020." Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 3 January 2019.

53 "Action Plan for the Implementation of the Open Government Partnership Initiative, 2021–2022." Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 24 August 2021.

54 Interview with Oleksandr Ryzhenko, online, 21 June 2022.

from the government received in 2020, invitations were issued to 17 thematic e-discussions, held from April to August: three on ecology and renewable energy; two on the economy and agriculture; three on infrastructure and regional development; one on corruption prevention; three on education and science; three on economic equality; and two on gender issues. Additional e-discussions were held with young people and another on civic engagement. Moreover, for most of the e-discussions, follow-up e-mails were sent with minutes attached. These e-discussions were also announced and reported by the government on its website.<sup>55</sup> As specified by the government, each thematic discussion embraced several SDGs: on ecology and renewable energy (SDGs 7, 12, 13, 14, and 15); on education and science (SDG 4); on youth (SDGs 4, 16, and 17); on infrastructure and regional development (SDGs 6, 9, and 11); on gender equality (SDG 5); on economic equality (SDGs 1 and 10); on economy and agriculture (SDGs 2 and 8); on corruption prevention (SDGs 3, 16, and 17); and on participatory decision-making (SDGs 16 and 17) (Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2022). Thus all 17 SDGs were covered. Such carefully designed discussion encouraged stakeholders to reflect on SDG and Open Government Partnership themes and devise new policy ideas linked to sustainable development. For example, a youth-focused practitioner highlighted that open government-related deliberation was good for the discussion and potential implementation of youth policies.<sup>56</sup>

One tangible outcome was that Ukraine's fifth national action plan for 2020–2022 contained three commitments on sustainable development areas previously missing in the Open Government Partnership Ukraine agenda. Specifically, the action plan included a youth-focused commitment (no. 10) “Facilitating more active participation of young people in forming and implementing state policy and addressing local issues”.<sup>57</sup> And although youth policies for civic participation do not introduce a new Sustainable Development Goal, they advance the earlier SDG 16, making it more inclusive. The discussion about broader themes enabled the development and advocacy of this “out-of-the-box” commitment. Furthermore, the fifth national action plan contained commitment 10 “Ensuring digital accessibility for persons with disabilities” and commitment 14 “Ensuring open access to gender-disaggregated data”.<sup>58</sup>

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55 “Timeline.” Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 2022. [https://www.kmu.gov.ua/timeline?category\\_id=18&tag=%D0%9F%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%20%22%D0%92%D1%96%D0%B4%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B9%20%D0%A3%D1%80%D1%8F%D0%B4%22&type=posts](https://www.kmu.gov.ua/timeline?category_id=18&tag=%D0%9F%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%20%22%D0%92%D1%96%D0%B4%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B9%20%D0%A3%D1%80%D1%8F%D0%B4%22&type=posts) (accessed 26 November 2024).

56 Interview with Anna Ostriкова, online, 7 December 2022.

57 “Action Plan for the Implementation of the Open Government Partnership Initiative, 2021–2022.” Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 24 August 2021.

58 “Action Plan for the Implementation of the Open Government Partnership Initiative, 2021–2022.” Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. 24 August 2021.

These policies are certainly linked to SDG 10 “Reduced inequality” and SDG 5 “Gender Equality”, respectively. Moreover, one expert explicitly credited the incorporation of gender-focused commitments in the national action plan to the application of the Agenda for Sustainable Development as a framework for the thematic structuring of the Open Government Partnership co-creation.<sup>59</sup> These three policies constitute slightly more than 21 % of the 14 commitments of Ukraine’s fifth national action plan of Ukraine. The policies are particularly noteworthy as they introduce not one (as in the previous national action plan), but two new SDGs and increase the prominence of another SDG in a government action plan.

## The Cumulative Role of SDG-Related E-Consultations in Open Government in Ukraine

The introduction of the Agenda for Sustainable Development into the digitally enabled co-creation process for the Open Government Partnership in Ukraine in both 2018 and 2020 produced a clear cumulative effect. It influenced civil society organisations, government authorities, interaction among stakeholders, and a whole ecosystem of open government.

Although the general baseline awareness about the SDGs among civil society organisations was insufficient, Open Government Partnership events which drew on the Agenda for Sustainable Development facilitated an increase in knowledge on sustainable development themes among Ukrainian civil society. One respondent reported that in contrast to central government authorities, which already used SDGs as a guide, the average level of awareness about SDGs among civil society organisations was low.<sup>60</sup> Another informant agreed that many civil society organisations were not aware of the SDGs, and even those civil society organisations that collaborated with international donor organisations and knew something about the Goals, only mentioned them formally and did not actually implement them in practice.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, one expert confirmed that although the level of knowledge about SDGs among non-expert civil society organisations was low, discussions on joint SDGs and Open Government Partnership themes helped raise awareness on these issues.<sup>62</sup> Another participant in the co-creation process added that during these public consultations, civil society participants learned a lot.<sup>63</sup> Yet another expert

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Oksana Grechko, online, 30 November 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Oleksii Kovalenko, online, 28 November 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Nazar Grom, online, 12 December 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Oksana Kosenko, online, 8 December 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Oksana Khomei, online, 28 November 2022.

stated that people involved in the co-creation process gained a deeper understanding of SDGs, and that this was beneficial.<sup>64</sup>

It is likely that Ukraine's authorities have changed their practices, moving towards more sustainable governance, thanks to the introduction of the Agenda for Sustainable Development into the Open Government Partnership process. As one expert reflected, since systemic change occurs based on international best practices, global commitments, and political responsibility, after committing to pursuing the SDGs, Ukraine's government had to transform internal policies and processes according to the principles of open government.<sup>65</sup> Another expert shared his opinion that the discussion of the SDGs in the context of the Open Government Partnership facilitated the review of and focus on priority government policy areas as well as giving new momentum for central authorities to implement the SDG-related policies that had already been adopted.<sup>66</sup> Another interviewee stated that the Open Government Partnership co-creation spurred a change in public administration practice, albeit unevenly across the different government ministries and agencies. This expert noted that the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers had adopted a prominent open government approach.<sup>67</sup>

Civic activists and public officials engaging in horizontal discussions on equal terms resulted in jointly debated, voted, and drafted policy priorities that embodied participatory, direct, and consensus democracy. According to an active participant in the process, when those involved in the "world café" voted for key reforms for the coming years, they felt a sense of belonging to the processes of prioritisation and policy-making at the national scale.<sup>68</sup> This expert points out that because event participants chose the top priorities via voting, they thereby enacted participatory democracy. Another informant explained that broad civic engagement in deliberation and decision-making signals direct democracy, which favours open government in general, while citizens have more access to information and influence the government's decisions and strategic policies.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the process provided civil society with excellent experience of joint national policy-making with the authorities, including ministries and the Cabinet of Ministers.<sup>70</sup> Specifically, the participants in the discussion had to put forward their positions and reach a compromise among multiple different stakeholders with many different ideas. This can be seen as a practice of consensus democracy.

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64 Interview with Nazar Grom, online, 12 December 2022.

65 Interview with Nazar Grom, online, 12 December 2022.

66 Interview with Oksana Kosenko, online, 8 December 2022.

67 Interview with Oksana Khomei, online, 28 November 2022.

68 Interview with Oksana Khomei, online, 28 November 2022.

69 Interview with Oksana Grechko, online, 30 November 2022.

70 Interview with Oksana Khomei, online, 28 November 2022.

In the Ukrainian context, the SDGs and open government appeared to be compatible and mutually complementary paradigms effectively producing synergy effects. As one expert indicated, the interpolation of the SDGs and Open Government Partnership systems permitted a more comprehensive outlook on a range of policy areas, thus rendering them more open, as well as on other areas that had been overlooked and were missing from previous action plans and this in turn opened the government further.<sup>71</sup> Another expert posited that the Open Government Partnership and SDGs are two strategic strands, the combination of which creates a particular ecosystem, in which SDGs facilitate the structuring and prioritising of a broad open government agenda, also converting the values they contain into strategic Open Government Partnership plans, thus making them more feasible.<sup>72</sup> Yet another informant suggested that both the Open Government Partnership and the SDGs are separate entities representing cooperation principles, where the former enables greater public engagement in planning SDG-related activities for the government to implement.<sup>73</sup> Another reason the combination of the SDGs and national action plans is important is because the action plans incorporated institutional sustainability considerations and, in return, open government assisted in ensuring transparency and openness.<sup>74</sup> On the one hand, open government's fundamental values of transparency, participation, accountability, and digital technologies can be channelled into more specific sectoral SDGs. On the other hand, the SDGs provide an overarching sustainable approach and a set of global goals, while the Open Government Partnership ensures a more actionable policy framework.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that in Ukraine, the emergence of open government, digital democracy, and the Agenda for Sustainable Development was a successive process. These phenomena were systematically combined for the first time in the Open Government Partnership co-creation process for the fourth national action plan in 2018 and then again during the development of the fifth national action plan in 2020.

A wide range of in-person and online consultations improved the Open Government Partnership policy-making process and embedded digital democracy as a policy in itself. E-consultations allowed policy ideas to be collected, e-discussions

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71 Interview with Oksana Kosenko, online, 8 December 2022.

72 Interview with Oksana Grechko, online, 30 November 2022.

73 Interview with Iuliia Kaplan, online, 30 November 2022.

74 Interview with Nazar Grom, online, 12 December 2022.

strengthened policy drafting, while consultative i-voting enabled the prioritisation of open government commitments. While in 2018, the combination of offline and online formats ensured an inclusive approach with a high number of diverse participants, the pandemic-induced online-only formats in 2020 relied on multi-stakeholder and versatile but expert involvement. Moreover, through the use of digital democracy tools and the engagement of advocates of this form of democracy, it was reflected in both the fourth and fifth national action plans in the form of commitments to develop and launch online platforms for cooperation between the citizens and the authorities. Thereby, in the context of open government, digital democracy served both instrumental and normative functions as a mediator and an ultimate objective, respectively.

The fourth and the fifth national action plans were deliberately and systematically connected to the SDGs, which broadened the horizon of policy-making and encouraged stakeholders to fill thematic gaps. The Sustainable Development Goals performed the role of guiding policy areas during offline and online discussions as well as in-person and i-voting, thereby clearly resulting in the introduction of Open Government Partnership commitments that reflected the SDGs, which is something that had never been adopted in Ukraine's national action plans before. The Sustainable Development Goals expanded the policy mandate of the Open Government Partnership Ukraine to include the themes of education, inclusion, and gender, corresponding with SDG 4 "Quality education", SDG 10 "Reduced inequality", and SDG 5 "Gender equality". This made these policies more inclusive and consistent with both the Agenda for Sustainable Development and Open Government Partnership values.

The integration of the Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Open Government Partnership co-creation process in Ukraine impacted the participating civil society organisations and government authorities as well as the democratic organisation of open government in general. Activities aligned with the SDGs raised the level of knowledge on the sustainable development of civil society and simultaneously encouraged the authorities to pursue a more sustainable approach to governance. The regular practice of peer-to-peer policy development between civic activists and public officials reflected participatory, direct, and consensus forms of democracy during the co-creation process.

The consolidation of Agenda for Sustainable Development and Open Government Partnership perspectives in Ukraine proved not to be unilateral, but mutually enriching. This coincides with the "twin transition" – the connection between the digital and sustainability transitions (Meijer 2024). In theory, the Open Government Partnership's core values of transparency, participation, accountability, and innovative technologies intersect with all SDGs, producing a new compound paradigm. In practice, joint activities focused on sustainable development and

open government benefited both the Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Open Government Partnership agendas. These patterns were observed in postrevolutionary, reformist, and pre-full-scale invasion Ukraine. Analogous effects may be found in other polities participating in the Open Government Partnership and pursuing development and reform in peacetime. Such synergy can be introduced by any government conforming with the principles of the Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Open Government Partnership. Our inquiry focused on relatively peaceful times; future studies may want to explore the transformation of the Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Open Government Partnership, and digital democracy in Ukraine during wartime.

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