

The impact of Russia's full-scale war on women's political participation in Ukraine

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AFU	Armed Forces of Ukraine
CEC	The Central Election Commission of Ukraine
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
GEI	Gender Equality Index
NAUCS	National Agency of Ukraine on Civil Service
MAAs	Military Administrations
MP	Member of Parliament
POW	Prisoners of War

Definitions

National Parliament of Ukraine – the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine

National Government of Ukraine – the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine

Abstract

Women's political participation is usually measured in binary terms – either in office or out of politics. This approach, however, overlooks the fact that political participation can be viewed as a continuum, with forms ranging from informal to formal. In the context of war, the movement within this continuum can be the only way for female politicians to preserve and exercise their political agency when the institutional foundation shakes.

Using a mixed-methods design, this paper explores the resignations of local female deputies in Ukraine after the full-scale Russian invasion that began on 24 February 2022. Based on nine semi-structured interviews with female politicians who exited formal politics, it maps the 'breaking points' leading to those decisions, the shifts in professional activities of respondents and intentions about future political participation. Quantitative data on the gender composition of 1577 local councils across different tiers at three points in time (2020, 2022, and 2026) explore structural patterns over time and reveal that the gender composition of councils remained stable (37% women to 63% men on average).

The qualitative part of the research suggests that resignations were shaped by border-crossing obstacles, political pressure, the expansion of the Military Administration's power, and accumulated exhaustion, combined with economic precarity. However, it also reveals that respondents shifted to forms of informal political participation, such as work at CSOs, charitable foundations, NGOs, and volunteering, indicating not a withdrawal but rather a relocation of their political agency.

Keywords: women's political participation, political representation, forms of formal and informal political participation, continuum of participation, substantive and descriptive representation, breaking points for resignation.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

What happens to democracy and gender equality in politics when those who fought for a seat at the table are now being pushed out of the room by the shaking of institutional foundations and the literal pressure of aerial attacks?

Women's participation in politics in Ukraine has undergone a long journey since 1991, the year the country gained independence. From being a small minority to taking almost 40% of local council seats during the last electoral cycle, female politicians moved beyond symbolic presence toward meaningful acts in the interests of those they represent. However, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has brutally disrupted this trajectory by placing Ukrainian female deputies in a precarious position where they have to fight for their existence and against gender barriers daily. The mandates, which were primarily intended to upscale positive social impact, in some cases became broken tools. As a result, some female politicians decided to abandon them.

How do we interpret this, however? Do we consider the resignation as a final withdrawal from formal politics and an indicator of a backlash, or do we view this as temporary? Do we treat ex-deputies' civic activities as forms of informal political participation, or are they out of count the moment they exit an office? This research essay aims to address these questions and explore the professional trajectories of Ukrainian local deputies who resigned after the full-scale Russian invasion. It will identify 'breaking points' that led to the decision to exit formal politics, the transformation of professional activity thereafter, and long-term political plans. Along with qualitative data analysis, I will examine the gender composition of local councils as of 2020, 2022, and 2026 to determine whether there were any significant structural changes.

Therefore, by outlining individuals' professional journeys from entry to exit from the office, this paper suggests tracing how their agency was strategically relocated at each stage. It does not aim to either normalise resignations or treat them as a failure of gender quotas, nor does it deny the importance of descriptive representation in politics. Instead, it suggests viewing the resignation of female deputies as a forced response to given circumstances and participation shift into informal roles where they can still exercise their political agency.

1.1. Contextual background: women’s political participation in Ukraine from 1991 to 2026.

Since Ukraine gained independence in 1991, women’s political representation at different levels has undergone significant changes, shifting from a marginal presence toward steady quantitative growth. The most evident progress can be seen in the national legislative branch, where the share of female members of parliament (MPs) reached 21% as of early 2023 – the highest level since 1991 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Gender Composition of the Ukrainian Parliament (1990-present)

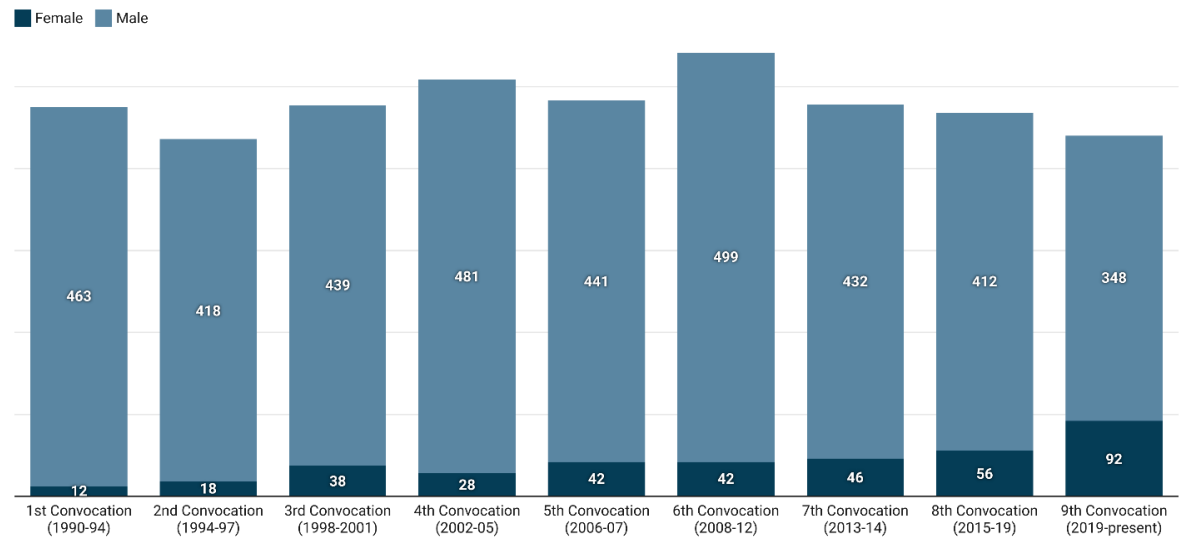


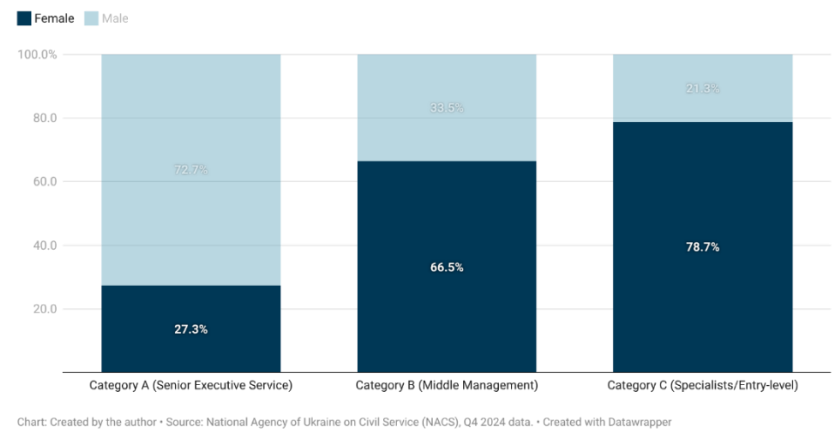
Chart: Visualized and adapted by the author based on "Slovo i Dilo" statistics. • Source: Official Verkhovna Rada Data. • Created with Datawrapper

A noticeable shift has been observed since the new Electoral Code, introduced in 2020, mandated 40% gender quotas for local councils (Levchenko & Sopilko, 2024). It required that, in every five places, the party ensure a 2-to-3 or 3-to-2 ratio of male to female candidates (Equal Future, n.d.). While the same requirement applies to the parliamentary elections as well, it has not yet been tested, as the full-scale Russian invasion interrupted an expected election cycle. However, this change yielded positive outcomes in the 2020 local elections, leading to women accounting for 44% of all candidates for local council seats, and subsequently, 37,2% of elected local deputies (Gender Equality Index in Ukraine, 2025). However, these figures do not automatically guarantee a sustainable long-term gender balance, as the compliance can remain formal rather than substantive (Observatoriia Demokratii, 2020). There were cases reported in which political parties bypassed these rules, either by placing women in “unwinnable” positions

on electoral lists or by securing prearranged agreements for female candidates to resign immediately after being elected (Observatoriia Demokratii, 2020). Consequently, while recognising the progress made, it is worth noting that the legal doctrine still has loopholes that allow one to bypass the system if there is no political will and no understanding of the importance of gender equality on a party’s side.

While quantitative growth is noticeable across different stages of elected bodies, a “glass pyramid” remains within administrative leadership. Hence, the Government Commissioner for Gender Equality Policy highlights the need to examine the civil service and its gender disparities. Data from the National Agency of Ukraine on Civil Service (NAUCS) reveals a clear trend: while women constitute nearly 79% of the workforce in Category 'C' (lower-tier) positions, their presence drops sharply to just 27% at the highest level of management (Category 'A') (Zmina, 2025a) (see Figure 2). Equalising this imbalance, along with the difference in representation at local self-government bodies, is one of the tasks mentioned in the State Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, 2025).

Figure 2
Gender Distribution of Ukrainian Civil Servants by Position Category (September-October 2024)



Since Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Ukraine’s political landscape has been fundamentally impacted. While Ukraine is under martial law, no elections, neither national nor local, can be held. Therefore, the current compositions of the Parliament and local councils have not changed since 2019 and October 2020, respectively. Furthermore, martial law has changed the rights and responsibilities of local council deputies, including restrictions on

travel abroad for both male and female deputies. Even though travel was possible, under the condition that certain documents confirming the purpose and legal grounds for the trip are provided, martial law created de facto significant obstacles, especially given that representatives work on a voluntary basis and do not receive a salary for their work at local councils. Although the Government amended the limitations in September 2025 (State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, 2025), the cumulative pressure of these restrictions over three and a half years cannot be ignored. As hypothesised in this study, these systemic burdens could have been one of the factors leading to a certain number of female deputies' resignations (Gender Equality Index in Ukraine, 2025, p. 35).

At the same time, local politicians, especially those based in regions proximate to the frontlines, have faced a number of new challenges and risks connected with security matters. While it is a universal challenge for all the local councils to redistribute their budgets and priorities so that a certain share is devoted to defence, the basic goal was not to be taken captive or killed. Not only were the local deputies in danger, but their close families as well, especially if they were on Russia's "hit lists"¹. Beyond this, the functional agency of local self-government bodies has been constrained by the introduction and expansion of Military Administrations (MAs). Originally, they were established as temporary state bodies aimed at ensuring national security, the operation of critical infrastructure, effective and fast decision-making, or governance in territories where local councils were unable to perform their duties or had defected to the enemy. However, it has been a matter of concern lately that their expansion sometimes leads to a significant concentration of power in the hands of appointed officials, bypassing elected local councillors (Balbon, 2024; Maksymova, 2023; Rzheutska, 2025). This institutional shift creates a risk of "re-centralisation"², where women's political participation is diminished not only by the war itself but by a systemic transfer of power from democratically elected bodies to appointed personalities. Crucially, as these MAs are predominantly composed of male military personnel and security officials, this transition further restricts the space for women to exercise their political agency and

¹ Reports by OHCHR and Human Rights Watch (2022) confirm that Russian occupation forces used pre-prepared lists of local officials for systematic detention, interrogation, or extrajudicial execution to neutralize local governance.

² In this context, "re-centralization" refers to the transfer of budgetary and executive powers from elected local councils to appointed Military Administrations (MAs), effectively bypassing the results of the 2014 decentralization reform.

advocate for community-specific needs, effectively sidelining the gendered perspectives that female representatives would otherwise bring to the policy-making process.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Along with everything above-mentioned, including an overall trajectory toward gender parity in politics that Ukraine commits to, the full-scale Russian invasion has created a 'perfect storm' of institutional, security, and personal pressures. While these circumstances became a catalyst for exits from formal political offices (resignations) for some female deputies, it is important to trace the change in their professional activities. Many of them became even more active in civic engagement, including volunteering, working for charitable foundations, civil society organisations, and with non-governmental organisations. However, it is often overlooked that political participation can be viewed as a spectrum from informal to formal, and these activities fall squarely into the informal category. This calls for exploring what a deputy's wartime resignation means not only for the individual but also for the broader landscape of gender equality in politics. Why do we consider these ex-deputies to be out of the political arena if they continue to exercise their political agency even outside the office?

1.3. Research Questions and Objectives

- What is the gender composition of local councils in Ukraine before and after the full-scale Russian invasion? Are there any differences/patterns by region (closeness to combat actions), settlement type?
- What are the reasons that lead female politicians to resign after the full-scale invasion?
- What are the main challenges for women engaged in formal political participation during wartime?
- Does resignation represent withdrawal from politics or transformation into informal civic engagement?

1.4. Hypotheses

Gender Equality Index in Ukraine (2025) notes that “due to the imposed obstacles for local government deputies to travel abroad, there is a tendency for women deputies who were active in public diplomacy, volunteering, or were interested in medical treatment or visiting relatives

abroad to resign their mandates. This situation may worsen the Index score in the next measurements.” While there was no prior research on this topic, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of this emerging phenomenon. Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- Female resignation during wartime is shaped by a combination of structural and personal challenges rather than a single cause.
- Some resignations may reflect shifts from formal office to informal civic engagement rather than political withdrawal.
- Existing challenges for women in politics and their public perceptions may stop potential female candidates from applying for formal political positions in future.

1.5. Methodology and Methods of Data Collection

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data with an analysis of existing legal and policy frameworks (the Electoral Code of Ukraine and the State Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men). For the quantitative part, data on the gender composition of local councils of different levels at three time points (2020, 2022, 2026) were collected from the Central Election Commission. Within the qualitative part, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with female politicians who resigned after 24 February 2022.

1.6. Contribution of the Research

This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of patterns and reasons for resignations of local deputies in Ukraine during wartime. It also reconceptualises resignation from formal politics not as a total withdrawal but as a shift in participation to informal politics. This invites us to further explore how we balance an attention to political work outside formal politics with thinking about the continued importance of formal political representation.

CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Women's political participation: from theory to metrics

This section provides a theoretical overview of women's presence in politics, tracing the trajectory from "having a seat at the table" to "the ways of exercising one's political agency after the decision to leave the table". It begins with a conceptualisation of descriptive and substantive representation, suggested by Pitkin (1967), and further echoes of these ideas in Phillips' (1998) politics of presence and politics of ideas. The discussion then moves further to a critical analysis of the accepted approaches to measuring women's formal participation in politics by standard metrics such as the Global Gender Gap Index. I argue that while these tools are helpful for comparing things in perspective, they overlook the aspect of substantiveness. Thereby, I introduce the concepts of 'critical mass' and critical acts (Dahlerup), critical actors (Childs and Krooks), and the role of feminist consciousness in discussions about presence (Tremblay and Pelletier). Finally, this subchapter presents the typology of different forms of political behaviour and the concepts of 'latent participation' and 'stand-by citizens' suggested by Ekman and Amna. These concepts serve as a fundamental toolkit for further analysing recent shifts in women's political participation in Ukraine and for understanding their agency beyond 'the table'.

2.1.1. The Importance of women's political participation: theoretical foundations

The theoretical point of departure for discussing political representation broadly is Pitkin's conceptualisation of the term and the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation she draws (Pitkin, 1967). Pitkin (1967) views descriptive representation as the "standing for" approach, in which representatives resemble those they represent. As she argues further, "the representative does not act for others; he [sic] "stands for" them, by virtue of a correspondence or connection between them, a resemblance or reflection" (p.61). Hence, Pitkin (1967) continues, it "entails neither authorization nor accountability" (p. 84). Thus, she is quite critical and sceptical, mainly because she is concerned that descriptive representation is passive and insufficient. On the other hand, she brings the idea of the substantive representation, where the representatives not merely stand for the represented but "acts for others". Furthermore, according to her, the importance of the activity itself outweighs the identity of a representative, meaning that if one acts in the interest of the people, their personal characteristics should not

matter at all (Pitkin, 1967). Thus, for the substantive representation, “what” is more defining, while for the descriptive, “who” comes first.

Type of representation	The priority	What a politician does
Descriptive	Who	Stands for
Substantive	What	Acts for

While purely theorising the logic of representation broadly, Pitkin did not address the gender aspect of this explicitly. At least, because in 1967, the term “gender” was not used broadly, and discussions of women in politics were not integrated into mainstream political theory. But if we were to think about the gender aspect of representation through her paradigm, it would be easy to see that she does not think it matters how many women are in a governmental body, as long as the government effectively addresses ‘women’s issues’. This perspective, however, was heavily challenged and criticised by feminist scholars for being too dismissive of descriptive representation and underestimating the risks of exclusion for democracies.

Anne Phillips (1998), in response to the then-dominant “politics of ideas” – a framework that derived from Pitkin’s ‘substantive representation’ and prioritised ideological platforms over the social identity of the representative – introduced the concept of the “politics of presence”. In the latter, unlike Pitkin’s framework, “the gender or ethnic composition of elected assemblies becomes a legitimate matter of democratic concern” (Phillips, 1998, p. 1). According to Pitkin, “what” (“policies, preferences, ideas” (Phillips, 1998, p. 9) is far more important than “who”. Phillips, however, argues that separating those is impossible. In a room full of men, their ideas, discussions, and solutions will predominantly stem from a male-centred reality, thereby ousting women’s perspectives and voices.

Mansbridge (1999) builds on Phillips’ ideas by arguing that, in certain historical contexts, descriptive representation should be prioritised, particularly when enhancing deliberation is a bigger goal. She acknowledges the potential risks and costs of descriptive representation and, in particular, the danger of essentialism – the simplified assumption that women as a group are homogeneous and that all share a singular trait, set of challenges, and interests based solely on their biological sex (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 637). However, she contends that in times of rapid socio-political change, crisis, or uncertainty, the benefits of descriptive representation particularly

outweigh the risks. In such contexts, “citizen interests on a given set of issues are relatively uncrystallized” (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 643), implying that they have not yet been translated into clear policies. Consequently, to ensure one’s substantive interests are represented, it is most viable “to choose a representative whose descriptive characteristics match one’s own on the issues one expects to emerge” (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 644). As an example of such historical context, Mansbridge points to the post-communist era in Eastern and Central Europe, when political parties lacked clarity about their new ideological orientations. In this situation, voters could rely on shared characteristics with their representative, expecting them to respond similarly to what the voter would have done in a time of uncertainty.

The current wartime and anticipated post-war context in Ukraine align perfectly with this theoretical framework. Russia’s full-scale invasion has placed everyone in a unique position, resulting in a unique constellation of experiences. The voice of a woman with two toddlers who had to flee abroad while her partner is in the armed forces could never be fully represented through a “trustee”, whether it be a man or woman with no experience of forced migration. This should not be necessarily attributed to a lack of political will on the part of the representative, but rather to an absence of shared lived experience. Without this experiential commonality, a representative – irrespective of their gender or intent – may lack the necessary ‘information proxy’ to fully comprehend or prioritise the nuanced needs arising from forced migration and wartime family separation.

Thus, Pitkin’s approach to theorising political representation prioritised what can be called ‘the politics of ideas’ in Phillips’ words, and diminished the importance of ‘who’. Feminist scholars, such as Phillips and Mansbridge, argue that, in an already gendered society, descriptive representation is a functional prerequisite for substantive representation. The ‘what’ cannot be properly articulated by the ‘who’ without the latter being exposed to certain experiences. Translating this into practical political terms means that women’s political representation is a foundation of democratic legitimacy and considered decision-making. The opposite, women’s absence in the places of decision-making, means the loss of valuable information and insights, or to put it in Haraway’s language (Haraway, 1988), situated knowledges, based on lived experiences.

2.1.2. Standard metrics and institutional representation

Given that women's presence in politics is essential for a democratic and inclusive society, the key question is: how is this participation practically monitored and assessed? Traditionally, the level of women's political participation is measured through standardised quantitative indicators: the ratio of women in a national parliament, regional and local elected bodies; the share of women among Government members, heads and members of supervisory boards of state-owned enterprises and heads of local self-government bodies (Levchenko & Sopilko, 2024). For instance, the Global Gender Gap Report measures political empowerment through three key indicators: the ratio of women to men in parliamentary seats, the ratio of women to men in ministerial positions, and the number of years a female head of state has held office in the last 50 years (Global Gender Gap Report 2025, 2025). Gender Equality Index (GEI), which was first calculated for Ukraine in 2025, according to the methodology of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), also measures political power through indicators "that characterise the share of women among deputies at all levels, senior government officials and local authorities" (Gender Equality Index in Ukraine, 2025). Hence, there is a mainstream approach of using numbers as indicators of progress or regression toward gender equality.

Using these numerical metrics is vital for unification and cross-national comparison, providing a practical benchmark for visualising progress. However, it is important to remember that this model is simplified. By focusing solely on numbers, these reports tend to overlook various forms of political participation and fail to indicate whether the women in these roles truly 'stand for' women.

The implication behind this simplified model, though rarely explicitly stated, is rooted in a frequently simplified interpretation of the 'critical mass' concept, which comes from nuclear physics and in social settings implies there has to be a certain minimum number of people to make a drastic change. Dahlerup (1988), who popularised it, cautioned against treating human beings' acts "automatically like particles" (1988, p. 296). Though she recognised that a larger share of women alters the institutional social climate, she concluded that there was no direct relationship between specific shares of women and changes across six dimensions of political life (such as political culture, political decisions, etc). Consequently, Dahlerup suggested to "turn the

question of a critical mass into a question of critical acts by the women politicians” (Dahlerup, 1988, p. 295). This statement does not dismiss the value of descriptive representation; instead, it offers that presence is an important but not the only precondition for substantive outcomes. The large share of women (the so-called critical mass) is not automatically a guarantee of institutional change, especially if the environment compels obedience and conformity to existing patriarchal standards. Similar findings were suggested by Vissandjee et al. (2005), who concluded that “quota saturation, in isolation, does not guarantee a level playing field for women in the political arena” (2005, p. 132)

Childs and Krook (2008), after reviewing almost two decades of gender and politics scholarly works, noticed that it was a common trend to misinterpret Dahlerup’s work “as if she had made a strong case in favor of the critical mass concept” (p. 732). They refer to these misinterpretations as ‘critical mass theory’, and describe two ways scholars engaged with it. The first one was the reinforcement of the assumption that the share of women is the “key determinant of their behavior”, reflecting a “politics of optimism,” (p. 732). The alternative scholar perspective was to reject ‘critical mass theory’ and stay rather sceptical of magical numbers, recognising other contributing constraint and opportunity factors (Childs & Krook, 2008). The primary innovation that Childs and Krook (2008) brought in their paper was the introduction of “critical actors”, who were defined as:

Male or female, these legislators can be identified as those who initiate policy proposals on their own and often – but not necessarily – embolden others to take steps to promote policies for women, regardless of the number of female representatives present in a particular institution. (p. 734)

By shifting the focus from a collective ‘mass’ to individual agency, the concept recognises the vast potential for substantive representation, even in environments that might not seem particularly conducive to ‘act for’ women. However, to realise this potential, critical actors have to have a “feminist consciousness”, as suggested by Tremblay and Pelletier (2000). Their quantitative research demonstrated that this variable had a stronger influence on opinions on liberal and gender-related issues than gender itself (Tremblay & Pelletier, 2000). Nevertheless, while men can have feminist values and bring them to the table, they cannot substitute for

women due to the lack of lived experience. Conversely, having more women in decision-making is a vital step, but alone it does not guarantee change if those women do not carry a feminist consciousness. Therefore, the strongest force for substantive representation is bringing in more feminist women, as they combine descriptive presence with the values necessary to challenge patriarchal status quos.

To sum it up, having the critical mass in a political office does not automatically mean expecting critical changes. Critical actors do critical acts. But those have to be actors with feminist consciousness. With that being said, I am not saying that numbers do not matter at all, nor do I undervalue the importance of gender quotas. I am convinced that we should have a sufficient number of women in governing bodies across all tiers to make sure women's needs and interests are represented. However, I believe that descriptive representation alone cannot guarantee a gender-transformative approach.

2.1.3. Different forms of political participation

The above-mentioned measurement systems, such as the Global Gender Gap Report and the Gender Equality Index, are tools for measuring women's formal political participation. Those tools rely on a dichotomous approach – you are either in an office, which means you are counted, and your country gets +1 to the score, or out of the office, automatically implying you are out of politics. While, in practical terms, it meets the need for some standardisation in measurement, this model is overly simplistic and does not account for the complex socio-political realities of each country and the different forms of political participation that appeared in neoliberal societies. In reality, political participation is much more complex than just a pretty number, especially when considering the gendered nature of this matter. Hence, there is a need to consider a broader typology of political participation that encompasses the variety of political behaviours.

Ekman and Amna (2012) problematize the tendency in academia to focus solely on manifest forms of political participation and to ignore its “latent forms” (2012, p. 284). They argue that by overlooking the “pre-political” or “potentially political” activities, we are losing “a more nuanced picture of the total engagement/participation situation in a given country” (Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 293). Therefore, the novelty of their typology is to recognise those acts as forms

of political participation itself, and to introduce the new category of “stand-by” citizens, who “are still very much interested in politics, informed, skilled, and have political efficacy beliefs. But, for the time being, many of them chose not to take part in politics in a conventional sense” (Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 297). Though we do not have an accurate answer on what could activate their readiness or willingness to engage in manifest forms of political participation, it is hypothesised that throughout the life course, individuals switch between different modes of participation. The typology, introduced by Ekman and Amna, is provided below (*see Figure 3*). It suggests differentiating between non-participation (disengagement), civil participation (latent-political) and political participation (manifest). While the first type, disengagement, anticipates the absence of actions or even opposing acting, the latter two imply certain actions. Worth noting that latent political actions, social involvement and civic engagement, are still visible (manifest) in the sense that they are outwardly identifiable and tangible. At the same time, they are latent in relation to “specific political parliamentary and extra-parliamentary actions” (Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 292).

Figure 3

Typology of different forms of disengagement, involvement, civic engagement and political participation

	Non-participation (disengagement)		Civil participation (latent-political)		Political participation (manifest)		
	Active forms (antipolitical)	Passive forms (apolitical)	Social Involvement (attention)	Civic engagement (action)	Formal political participation	Activism (extra -parliamentary political participation)	
						Legal/ extra - parliamentary protests or actions	Illegal protests or actions
Individual forms	Non-voting Actively avoiding reading newspapers or watching TV when it comes to political issues Avoid talking about politics Perceiving politics as disgusting Political disaffection	Non-voting Perceiving politics as uninteresting and unimportant Political passivity	Taking interest in politics and society Perceiving politics as important	Writing to an editor Giving money to charity Discussing politics and societal issues, with friends or on the Internet Reading newspapers and watching TV when it comes to political issues Recycling	Voting in elections and referenda Deliberate acts of non-voting or blank voting Contacting political representatives or civil servants Running for or holding public office Donating money to political parties or organizations	Boycotting and political consumption Signing petitions Handing out political leaflets	Civil disobedience Politically motivated attacks on property
Collective forms	Deliberate non - political lifestyles, e.g. hedonism, consumerism In extreme cases: random acts of non political violence (riots), reflecting frustration, alienation or social exclusion	*Non-reflected * non - political lifestyles	Belonging to a group with societal focus Identifying with a certain ideology and/or party Life -style related involvement: music, group identity, clothes, et cetera For example: veganism, right -wing Skinhead scene, or left-wing anarcho - punk scene	Volunteering in social work, e.g. to support women 's shelter or to help homeless people Charity work or faith - based community work Activity within community based organizations	Being a member of a political party, an organization, or a trade union Activity within a party, an organization or a trade union (voluntary work or attend meetings)	Involvement in new social movements or forums Demonstrating, participating in strikes, protests and other actions (e.g. street festivals with a distinct political agenda)	Civil disobedience actions Sabotaging or obstructing roads and railways Squatting buildings Participating in violent demonstrations or animal rights actions Violence confrontations with political opponents or the police

Note. From “Political participation and civic engagement: Towards a new typology”, by J. Ekman & E. Amnå, 2012, *Human Affairs* 22(3), p. 295 (DOI: 10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1). CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

Why is this theoretical approach important for gender studies and in the context of gender equality in politics? Firstly, acknowledging the diversity of forms of political participation helps us see women across all of them and hypothesise about the patterns, reasons and consequences. For example, if we see a large number of younger women engaged in civic participation, while formal political participation is predominated by middle-aged women, we can go further and explore the restraining factors (such as the absence of child-care facilities, etc.). Secondly, if treating “stand-by” citizens as a reservoir for potential political participation, we can further explore the factors that can facilitate their readiness and willingness. Thirdly, this theoretical approach implies that women’s resignations from formal politics do not necessarily indicate a loss of motivation or commitment, nor should they be immediately treated as an indicator of backlash. While the formal resignation can signify the loss of political power, it can also be viewed as temporary, forced or led by the motive to accumulate other forms of capital that would later convert into more political power.

2.2. Impact of war on gender equality and women’s political participation

This section explores how women’s political participation transforms in the context of war. The first part introduces the complex reality of Ukrainian politics, where, on the one hand, women’s political engagement at the local level has strengthened and new forms of activity have emerged, yet on the other hand, the ground for political mobility is precarious and rife with structural frictions. Then, I introduce the theoretical concept ‘the continuum of political participation’, used by Balbon, to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of the current political field. The second part of this subchapter presents the forms of political participation and the barriers women face in navigating this spectrum.

2.2.1. Reclaiming agency during a war: a window of opportunity or a baseline for a backlash?

All wars are gendered, which means they change the existing gender relations in a society, affect men and women differently, and alter the societal perceptions of masculinities and femininities (Strelnyk, 2024). However, within gender studies on war and security, there is a range

of opposing perspectives regarding the impact of wars on women's rights. While some scholars argue that wars tend to deepen gender inequalities and significantly worsen women's conditions, setting the ground for further backlash, others suggest that conflict presents a 'window of opportunity'. Another perspective would be to view that the effects of war, though thoroughly gendered, are complex in terms of outcomes and cannot be put in a binary.

As Strelnyk (2024) notes, the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine exemplifies this complexity as it has given rise to rather eclectic processes: certain conservative trends coexist with noticeable progress toward gender equality. An example of the former would be compulsory military conscription for men, while it remains optional for women, and strong societal expectations regarding men's roles during wartime, including the dominant image of the male warrior. The latter one could be best illustrated by all the positive legal changes, such as the adoption of the State Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men until 2030, the Strategy for Gender Equality in Education until 2030 and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention Action against violence against women and domestic violence (Strelnyk, 2024, p. 207).

The most recent research suggests that a notable strengthening of women's political participation is observed at the local level, particularly within the structures of local self-government (Balbon, 2024; NGO 'Kremenchuk Anti-Corruption Centre', 2025). In some way, the war became a catalyst for this. Often, women themselves say that while men are on the front lines, they are the ones to step into management roles in civilian life. This, however, does not imply that their decisions are forced solely by external circumstances; instead, it suggests that a certain conducive environment for these decisions was created. This shift resonates with the theoretical framework of 'stand-by' citizenship (Ekman & Amnå, 2012) mentioned above; in the presence of a certain trigger, latent political participation may be further activated.

However, it is important to recognise that war-driven changes are not uniform everywhere; therefore, generalisation becomes nearly impossible. As Balbon (2024) states, "women lose and win political power, depending on the form and level of their political participation as well as the geographical context" (p. 5). For example, within a single oblast – the first-level administrative division – there are areas still occupied by Russia, territories that have been de-occupied, and

regions that were never occupied. Based on this, the risks, opportunities, and challenges vary significantly. Regarding differences across forms of political participation, a recent case study of the Kharkiv region found a lack of mobility between them, in particular from informal participation to formalised roles (Balbon, 2024, p. 7). The findings of another study are more optimistic, and suggest that different forms of activities often transform into each other – a volunteer becomes a leader of a community initiative, while the latter becomes a candidate or an expert in a local city council (NGO ‘Kremenchuk Anti-Corruption Centre’, 2025, p. 11).

The complexity of women’s political paths and the fluidity of their roles in formal and informal politics can be best understood through a continuum of participation, introduced in Balbon’s paper (2024, p. 4). This spectrum highlights a range of roles between formal and informal political participation in which women are involved. However, it is worth mentioning that women’s paths across this continuum are rarely linear. The grassroots agency does not necessarily transform into formal power, whereas the challenges and constraints of formal political participation might prompt one to switch into activism. Hence, this continuum is a helpful tool for acknowledging the complexity of political participation, but should not be seen as an automatic one-way (upward) trajectory. Rather, this is a contested space where women’s political mobility is shaped by system-embedded constraints and the strategic calculus of their own perceived impact.

Figure 4
The continuum of women’s political participation

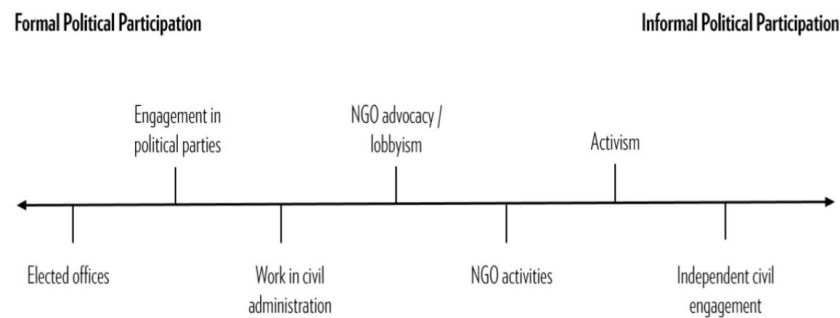


Illustration inspired by Koens and Gunawardana.⁵

Note. From “Political participation in Kharkiv: Gendered wartime changes and opportunities”, by N. Balbon, 2024, p. 4.

2.2.2. The glass walls of political participation: mobility barriers

As mentioned above, the idea of a continuum of political participation suggests there is space for political mobility. However, in real life, especially in a war context, this mobility is constantly negotiated and shaped by various challenges. Building on recent research by a Ukrainian local NGO, “Kremenchuk Anti-Corruption Centre” (2025), five main forms of women’s political participation in Ukraine during full-scale war were identified:

- Volunteering and humanitarian work;
- Civic engagement and work at NGOs;
- Participation in self-governance structures;
- Informal leadership roles in ‘hromadas’ (local communities);
- Advocacy work, informational and online activities.

Authors of the study admit that volunteering is perceived as a political activity because it has a “patriotic and social effect”, while civic engagement provides women with an impact on local decision-making processes, such as the distribution of humanitarian assistance and rebuilding of infrastructure (NGO ‘Kremenchuk Anti-Corruption Centre’, 2025, p. 11). Therefore, we observe that the perception of what it means to be politically active is much broader than the traditional idea of holding an office. Women themselves, who perform all these activities, consider them political and do not rule out the possibility of formalising their roles in the future.

However, the same study highlights that the transition is rarely seamless, and there are significant challenges in shifting from an informal to a formal role. Both structural issues and individual and social barriers are thereby highlighted through seven focus group discussions conducted within the study. Barriers were grouped into five categories (NGO ‘Kremenchuk Anti-Corruption Centre’, 2025, p. 13):

- *Culturally psychological*. This category of barriers encompasses all narratives about traditional roles for women, and particularly how those restrain women from pursuing political aspirations.
- *Family and domestic constraints*. This category highlights the burden of the ‘double shift’ that makes it nearly impossible for women to be politically active, unless they have support systems (other family members, a nanny).

- *Institutional and political barriers.* These are structural gatekeeping tools that make formal politics unwelcome to newcomers.
- *Resource-based barriers.* A lack of financial capital, needed for the election campaign and participation, falls into this category. This type of obstacle is even more crucial for internally displaced women who have lost their housing, personal belongings, and different kinds of capital and need to integrate into a new community. Also, this category includes very concrete infrastructural issues, such as a lack of available kindergartens, the inability to work remotely, and a lack of transport systems.
- *Security and trauma-related barriers, the IDP (internally displaced person) status.* This category of barriers includes war-caused trauma, chronic stress and the general sense of instability – especially for those who have gone through the losses, political activity seems to be secondary compared to survival.

These findings suggest that the typical gendered barriers in the context of war not only remain, but they are also being reproduced. While women remain active at the local level (sometimes even more than before the full-scale war), they face numerous obstacles. Thereby, we might have cases where women's work is visible and appreciated, but the access to decision-making spaces and formalised political power is still gatekept. Hence, the transition from informal to formal forms of political participation is not an expected trajectory but rather a struggle through friction. Conversely, the decision to abstain or exit formal politics is not an indicator of individual weakness or incompetence, but a signifier of institutional failure to provide space for real impact. The above-mentioned conceptual insights set the stage for further exploration of how women who exited formal politics perceive and narrate their lived experiences.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design: A mixed-methods approach

The study employs a mixed-methods research design that combines quantitative and qualitative data analyses. This approach was chosen to bridge macro- and micro-level perspectives. Furthermore, the study treats resignations as outcomes, implying that the reasons, or underlying push factors, need to be studied. Therefore, the research design consists of two data collection phases:

- **Quantitative phase (macro-level analysis):** This phase involves the collection and analysis of official data on the gender composition of local councils obtained through Access to Information requests to the Central Election Commission of Ukraine (CEC). The objective is to establish whether the full-scale invasion created any significant shift in women's representation across council levels. This data cannot map the scale of individual resignations due to the party-list replacement mechanism.
- **Qualitative phase (micro-level analysis):** To move beyond numerical data, the study utilises semi-structured interviews with 9 female (former and active) local deputies. This phase is rooted in feminist standpoint theory, which prioritises the "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988) of women. The goal is to uncover the complex motivations behind political exits, ranging from security concerns and personal circumstances to institutional pressures from Military Administrations.

The combination of these methods helps to go beyond "how many" women resigned to "why: what led to this" and "how they narrate this". This holistic approach helps avoid a simplistic interpretation that could have resulted from relying solely on numbers.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

This section provides a detailed description of the two-phase research design and the methods for data collection. First, it outlines the procedure for collecting and the logic of disaggregating numerical data. Subsequently, it describes the sampling design, recruitment nuances, and ethical protocols for the semi-structured interviews conducted within the study.

3.2.1. Quantitative Data: Official Information Requests

The quantitative component of this research is based on primary data obtained from the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Ukraine through an official Access to Information request. The received dataset provides a comprehensive gender-disaggregated overview of elected local councillors across all tiers of local self-government, including regional (oblast), district (raion), city, settlement, and village councils. Data is also disaggregated according to three important timestamps:

1. December 31, 2020: the post-election baseline.
2. February 23, 2022: the day before Russia's full-scale invasion.
3. March 12, 2026: the current status.

The analysis focused on comparing the total number of elected deputies with the current number of active mandates. Data was processed, and basic descriptive calculations were conducted in Google Sheets to identify patterns across different levels of council (e.g., between regional and smaller village councils). This quantitative mapping served as the empirical basis for the subsequent qualitative phase, ensuring that the interviews were situated within a clear national statistical context.

3.2.2. Qualitative Data: Semi-structured Interviews

Within the research, 9 semi-structured interviews in Ukrainian were conducted between March and April 2026. Participants were recruited through an open call via a Google Form, initially posted³ on the NGO's "Political action of women" Facebook page and then shared across regional Facebook groups for politicians and civic activists. The Form yielded 20 responses; 7 of which were excluded at the screening stage because they were from women who are active deputies at their councils and continue to perform their duties. A screening question for this was "indicate your current status". The other 13 recruited participants were reached through a messenger they mentioned in the Form. Though all 13 interviews were planned, 4 of them were rescheduled several times and, eventually, could not be conducted. While initially, I thought of this as a methodological weakness, I further reflected on the respondents' reasoning and came to an

³ Link to the post: <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1BGra7dJGd/>

understanding that those are not merely logistical. In each of four cases, the interviews were rescheduled due to power outages, the possibility of an attack and/or unexpected professional duties. These circumstances accurately reflect the conditions in which female deputies, volunteers, and civic activists in Ukraine operate, and therefore, the interviews that have never occurred cannot simply be omitted. The research process starts not when I begin recording the conversation, but much earlier, and these conditions themselves are part of the argument I am developing in this study.

The sampling logic follows the approach used in a recently published study on women's political participation during times of war and recovery (NGO 'Kremenchuk Anti-Corruption Centre', 2025), utilising the NUTS-UA (Statistical Classification of Territorial Units of Ukraine) framework. This model, aligned with Eurostat standards, was adopted to provide a standardised basis for comparing regional data across Ukraine (State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2024). It groups oblasts⁴ into 8 macro-regions based on socio-economic unity and population size, along with administrative borders. The same regional stratification approach was applied here to ensure a comprehensive geographical and security-based (accounting for proximity to combat actions) representation of participants. Other parameters for stratification were:

- Council level (city, village, or oblast council);
- Mandate status (formally resigned; formally active, but *de facto* inactive).

Also, during an interview, if a participant mentioned that she knew someone who had also resigned, the interviewer asked for contact information. Therefore, a snowball sampling technique was also applied, along with quota sampling. This was essential to reach participants beyond the NGO's audience, who are generally more aware of the gender-sensitive topics. Consequently, the sample included female politicians from 6 (out of 8) macro-regions of Ukraine. The macro-region 2 (Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts) and macro-region 4 (Mykolaiv, Odesa, Kherson, Crimea and Sevastopol city) are not represented in the study, as those territories are either to a great extent occupied, de-occupied or remain high-intensity combat zones, which poses a lot of practical constraints for recruitment of participants. 3 respondents represent the

⁴ Oblast is the name of the first-level administrative division in Ukraine. There are 24 oblasts, 1 autonomous republic of Crimea and 2 cities with special status.

regional councils, 4 – village councils, and 6 – city councils. The detailed composition of the sample is presented in *Table 1* below.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Research Sample

ID (Code)	Oblast	Micro-region (NUTS-UA)	Council Level	Mandate Status
R1	Lviv	MK 7	Regional (Oblast)	Resigned
R2	Chernihiv	MK 1	City	Resigned
R3	Kyiv	MK 7	Village	Resigned
R4	Zhytomyr	MK 8	City	Formally holds mandate
R5	Lviv	MK 7	Regional (Oblast)	Resigned
R6	Khmelnyskyi	MK 5	Village	Resigned
R7	Kyiv	MK 6	Village	Formally holds mandate
R8	Zaporizhzhia	MK 3	Regional (Oblast)	Formally holds mandate
R9	Kyiv	MK 8	City	Formally holds mandate

Note. Created by the author based on the Google Forms responses for the recruitment of participants.

The interview guide consisted of 4 major blocks: (1) context and background of the participant; (2) the moment of decision-making and mechanics of it; (3) informal political participation vs. formal exit; (4) political future and “reverse mobility”. The full interview guide in the original Ukrainian and the translated English version can be found in Appendix A. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, questions were sometimes modified to reflect each participant’s profile and personal circumstances. For example, participants closer to the frontline received additional focus on physical safety, while those who were temporarily displaced abroad, or whose kids were, were asked in more detail about border-crossing challenges. Each interview lasted for 30-50 minutes on average and was conducted online via Zoom.

To ensure respondents feel secure about sharing personal and potentially sensitive data, it was clearly stated in the recruitment Google Form and at the beginning of each interview that participation would be confidential. While respondents' identities are disclosed to the researcher and NGO she represents, any personal details (such as names) will not be shared externally. Also,

at the beginning of each interview, the interviewer asked for permission to record the conversation and did so only after clear oral informed consent from the participant. Interview transcripts were generated automatically using online tools such as GoodTape and TurboScribe, then audited and edited manually. Both tools mention on their websites that files are encrypted and not shared with any third parties. To analyse the collected data, NVivo 14 was used for thematic coding and analysis.

3.3. Positionality and Reflexivity

Drawing on Haraway's (1998) theory of "situated knowledge" and the idea of accountable positioning, I shift to a first-person narrative and dedicate this sub-chapter to reflecting on how my identity influenced both the knowledge produced and the research process itself.

Being a Ukrainian who has lived through war firsthand established a fundamental level of trust with participants and gave a baseline understanding of the context necessary for this study. Sharing lived experiences, such as aerial attacks or electricity blackouts, made it much easier for me to understand participants' references and emotions, while allowing them to share their perspectives freely without the need for extensive background explanation. At the same time, I recognise that I do not have the experience of living in immediate proximity to the combat zones, under the Russian occupation or under constant severe physical danger, unlike some of the respondents of this study. That is why I needed a certain level of epistemic humility to acknowledge and be transparent about the limits of my own understanding. In some cases, I had to acknowledge that my questions might not perfectly align with the realities of some respondents and be very clear that our conversation is a mutual exchange of knowledge. This positionality, though it posed me with some vulnerability, advantaged me by providing valuable insights from lived experiences I would not have known about otherwise. For example, one of the participants, from the region where 80% of the territory is occupied, shared how it feels to live a few kilometres away from the combat actions.

Given the inherent sensitivity of political topics at any time, particularly in wartime, when discussions of elections are often treated as taboo, I had to carefully consider this aspect. In the research design, I chose to exclude any parameters that might indicate affiliation with any political party. Practically, it meant I had not asked about party affiliation, neither in the recruitment

Google Form nor during the interview. I knew that such data would not give any significant input to the results, whereas excluding it helped to avoid unnecessary tensions and questions about political positioning. With this said, I also acknowledge that this methodological choice might have been a limitation and has not provided insights into the relation between one's party affiliation and ability to act as a 'critical actor' or have 'feminist consciousness'.

My affiliation with the NGO "Political Action of Women" was transparent and instrumental in disseminating the recruitment call. While the NGO's name was mentioned in the recruitment Google Form, it is notable that participants could have asked for the name of my NGO at the end of the conversation. This suggests they were eager to contribute, not because of their prior allegiance to the NGO, but because of their genuine interest in the topic and the need to have their experiences heard and documented.

Finally, the sensitivity of the topics discussed definitely demanded a lot of emotional engagement and empathy on my side. Participants shared the stories of their relatives being taken in Russian captivity or killed in a war, as well as experiences of political pressure, health crises and migration circumstances their families experienced. All of this would not have been possible if I had not shown a lot of compassion and remained a "cold", detached data collector. From the very beginning, I chose to embrace my positionality as a humane feminist Ukrainian scholar, prioritising compassion and empathy as essential methodological tools for understanding the complex and painful reality I am studying.

3.4. Methodological Challenges and Ethical Safety

Conducting research in a country currently undergoing a full-scale invasion poses unique methodological challenges that often transcend standard research ethics protocols. To address them carefully and compassionately, I relied on the "ethic of caring", which consists of three components: "the value placed on individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy" (Collins, 2002, p. 263). Furthermore, I believe this approach cannot be confined solely to an interview itself; rather, it must serve as a foundation for the whole process – from the moment the participant recruitment strategy is designed to post-interview communication with the respondents.

On practical terms, for me as a researcher currently based abroad, this meant prioritising the needs of participants residing in Ukraine, who frequently experience electricity blackouts and/or regular attacks, and be ready to adjust to upcoming changes very quickly. Furthermore, I remained aware of the caregiving responsibilities my respondents carry and ensured the interview was conducted at their convenience without taking up too much of their limited time. I view this flexibility not merely as a logistical necessity, but as a form of care – the fundamental consideration I can offer to people who contributed their time, knowledge and expertise to this research.

One of the three components of the ethic of caring, as suggested by Collins (2002, p. 263), is “the capacity for empathy”. For this topic to be discussed sincerely and deeply, empathy should serve as the foundation for creating an emotionally safe space. Personal stories about captivity or the threat of occupation cannot be treated as mere data points and immediately followed by the next question in the interview guide to stick to the agenda. Equally important is the notion of actual safety, particularly for respondents sharing details of sensitive experiences, such as political pressure or manipulation.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Comparative analysis of gender composition of local councils (2020, 2022, 2026)

This section presents an aggregate statistic on the gender composition of local councils at three points in time: 2020, 2022, and 2026. Before studying individual trajectories and motivations behind political exits, it is important to examine whether Russia’s full-scale invasion led to any significant structural changes in the numbers.

The dataset obtained from the Central Election Commission (CEC) upon an official request provides gender-disaggregated data on the composition of 1577 local councils across different levels of administration. The data constitute the entire population of local councils rather than a representative sample; hence, the observed changes reflect the actual changes rather than estimates. While this time-series data provides valuable insights into gender composition, it cannot be interpreted as resignation data because it is not longitudinal. Under the law, if a deputy resigns, they are replaced by the next candidate on the party list; and therefore, the total number of deputies is generally supposed to remain stable. Hence, we can observe the absolute number and percentage of women at a given timestamp, but we do not know how many women have actually resigned or who replaced them. The full original dataset is presented in *Annex B*.

Table 2 presents the overall gender composition of Ukrainian local councils in 2020, 2022, and 2026. From it, we can observe that between 23 February 2022 and March 2026, the total number of deputies decreased by 886 (579 male and 307 female deputies). Though in theory, this change in absolute number was not supposed to happen due to the replacement rule, during wartime, there are a number of exemptions. Among the factors contributing to this are combat actions or the occupation of certain cities; the ban on pro-Russian parties, which deprived the deputies who used to represent them of a mandate; and changes to the territorial structure (e.g., the creation of new amalgamated territorial communities (Hromadas). However, the ratio of women to men has remained stable despite the overall change in numbers, and remains 37% to 63%. It is important to note that this data cannot be interpreted as indicating that 886 deputies have resigned in these 4 years. The actual number of resignations could be much higher – these people could have been replaced by other candidates from party lists.

Table 2

The gender composition of the local councils in Ukraine, 2020, 2022, and 2026

	Dec 2020	Feb 2022	Mar 2026
Women	15,812 (36.97%)	15,902 (37.02%)	15,595 (37.07%)
Men	26,959 (63.03%)	27,053 (62.98%)	26,474 (62.93%)
Total deputies	42,771	42,955	42,069

Table: created by the author • Source: Central Election Commission (CEC) • Created with Datawrapper

If we were to analyse this data across council tiers, we would notice a significant difference of more than 10% between village and oblast councils, both before and after the full-scale invasion (see *Figure 5*). Oblast councils are the highest level of government among the others mentioned; therefore, vertical segregation remains the strongest there. Overall, the graph suggests that women's representation remained relatively stable at all levels. Worth mentioning that the credits for this gender balance stability should be given to the gender quota for local councils, introduced in the latter local elections and discussed above. Not only did the quota require a certain share of women, but also a certain sequence of party candidates (a 2-to-3 or 3-to-2 ratio of male to female candidates for every 5 places). This had positive outcomes not only during the election itself but also in cases like these, where the probability of turnout is higher as the duration of cadency grows.

Considering the original gender imbalance in councils and the fact that, after resignations, the gender composition has remained the same, it is no wonder that the absolute number of male deputies who resigned exceeds that of female deputies. However, it can be hypothesised that the reasons behind those decisions differ and are gendered. At least one basic reason is that military conscription is obligatory for men but not for women. In addition to responsibilities, societal expectations about one's role during war should also be considered. In particular, military service is generally more expected of men, so the total number of males in the Armed Forces is higher than the number of females. Respectively, the number of males who volunteered to join the army immediately after the invasion started is also higher.

Figure 5

Women's share of local council seats in Ukraine, 2020, 2022, and 2026

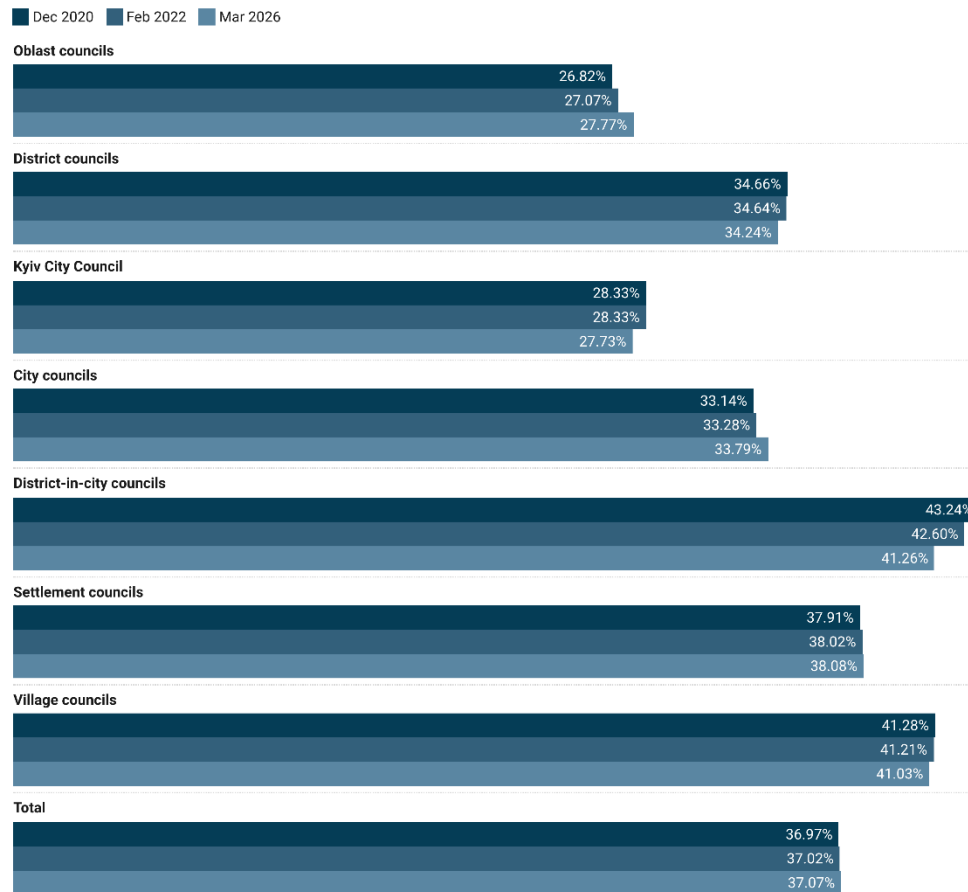


Chart: Created by the author • Source: Central Election Commission (CEC) • Created with Datawrapper

Even though this data indicates relative stability in the quantitative composition of local councils, we cannot speculate on the actual scale of changes. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, these numbers might conceal a bigger number of women who were replaced. While the numbers show we have 307 fewer women, it might also be that during this time, 500 women resigned and 193 took their places. This data alone does not allow us to explore longitudinal changes and hypothesise about their causes and scale. Therefore, the following section turns to in-depth interviews with local female politicians who resigned to explore what lies beneath the stable numbers.

4.2. The mandate (formal political participation) as an instrument

Building on the analysis of structural trends, this section will explore the individual lived experiences of female local politicians who have resigned after 24th February 2022. The analysis will be structured in a temporal frame, from their entry into politics to their exit from formal

politics and the transformation of their professional paths. This longitudinal approach will facilitate a deeper understanding of their life trajectories and the perception of the mandate at different stages.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews, the analysis of pre-full-scale war experiences and respondents' initial motivations to enter politics demonstrates that, for most, entering formal politics was primarily an instrument for scaling and enhancing their existing civic engagement. Since many of them were already engaged in the non-governmental sector or grassroots activism, they treated the mandate as a “tool” to scale impact. They were not primarily interested in acquiring more political power, or at least it was not explicitly mentioned. This mission-oriented approach to politics, as assumed in most interviews, invites us, from the very beginning, to draw an important distinction between career-driven and activist politicians. For the former ones, holding a mandate was a tool for social change, not for power’s sake.

"In fact, a community where I knew many people was formed – and we, as that community, went in to do something good. So, for many of us, not just for me, it probably wasn't some [burning] desire to 'enter politics.' Most of us were volunteers at various levels, and this was like an invitation to a group that could change things. In other words, for us, it was an additional opportunity to do good deeds. That was likely the original motivation." (R1)

For that to happen, they had to have a certain level of readiness and willingness. Some of them mentioned that, at the moment, they acknowledge it was, in some way, a self-sacrifice. To put it in perspective, being a deputy in a local council (village, city, or regional) in Ukraine is unpaid, and most people combine it with their main full-time jobs. So, even without considering all the gendered burdens and challenges, such as the ‘double shift’ and disproportionate share of caring responsibilities, it is a decision that requires weighing the pros and cons. In the Ukrainian context, where this ‘sacrifice’ does not provide financial compensation and creates a ‘third shift’, this makes the ‘cost’ of entry significantly higher for women. Furthermore, it is a decision that affects not only a person but also their closest surroundings, which is another aspect worth consideration. This is how one of the participants of the study described her experience:

"And so I came home, and I thought I had this kind of internal readiness; I could dedicate five years of my life to the community. At that time, I spoke with my husband and with my mother, because my mother is a local resident here, and for her, it's very important – if you enter some political [field] or participate, it always affects your family. I spoke with my mother, I spoke with my brother, they all supported me, and I decided to run for the head [of the council]." (R7)

While the respondents shared many similarities in their motivations for entering, they varied in their perceived efficacy and impact. The opinions ranged from having no impact at all to being highly impactful. Three things are important for considering here:

- 1) This obviously does not depict the actual productivity of their work, nor does it indicate their lack of care or incompetence. Instead, it rather describes the environment in which they had to work.
- 2) Their perception of their impact and their actual capacity to initiate and implement changes are also closely related to whether they were independent candidates (no party representatives), belonged to the leading party or were in opposition.
- 3) The amount of impact they had depended heavily on the level and size of the council they represented. While their vote might weigh much more on a small-town council, even if they were in opposition, it might not change much in a regional council, especially if they are not in a coalition.

For instance, one respondent who had both served two terms in a city council and then became a deputy of the regional council, when answering this question, starts with describing the context of the regional council: *"I felt there was more 'politics' and less of the actual decision-making that impacts the life of the communities. In our oblast, I felt that my colleagues were more interested in populist decisions, focusing more on [political] statements and appeals from the regional council rather than on real projects"* (R5). While further **contrasting her experiences at different levels of governing**, she discussed a dilution of one's agency within a larger self-governance body. While within a smaller city council, her education and experience were more valued and respected, the regional council required constant political compromises. This self-reflection leads her to the conclusion that she does not consider herself an influential or effective

deputy in a regional council. She elaborated further: *"In terms of the number of submitted projects – yes; in terms of the amount of work done – yes; but I do not consider myself an impactful [result-oriented] deputy in the regional council"* (R5). While it might seem to be quite a self-critical claim at first, she makes a very helpful distinction between procedural effectiveness and substantive impact shaped by the circumstances in which she was acting.

Another respondent, while reflecting on this, brought up **the comparison between her prior experience as an activist vs being a deputy**. She highlighted a profound ethical and psychological tension she experienced after joining the village council. She was very clear and honest about her council to be a “shameful [meaning either corrupt, unprofessional or pro-Russian] environment”, where out of 22 persons, only 3 were “honourable”. So, even though, before entering politics, she was aware that shameful officials existed, the emotional burden of being forced to cooperate with those people now was very heavy: *“... here I had to be like part of the same team. I had never been in that position before. In the same team with shameful people, with whom I had to make decisions”* (R7). But then, further in her answer, she starts bringing examples of good changes she initiated during her term, and the list is quite long and speaks for itself. She concludes by saying:

“You can have an influence, and perhaps you even have more levers of influence than you do as an activist. But when you are an activist, it's easier because you don't have to work directly with these people; you aren't constantly at loggerheads [in conflict] with them. As a deputy, however, you have to sit with them in the same session hall. Sometimes you have to find compromises ... In activism, what's great is this freedom of action. You can criticise however you like, and so on. When you are a deputy, you often cannot do much publicly; your hands are tied. But at the same time, you have that one vote you can use. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't” (R7).

Her story introduces us to a foundational **dilemma of influence vs autonomy** that would be further identified as a theme during conversations. While a mandate might be a desired tool to gain a vote and a seat at the table that would not be otherwise available, it comes with the need to trade off a certain amount of freedom. This is never a static choice, but rather a constant negotiation for better efficacy. The question still remains: what is the “exit logic” – what is a trigger or culmination point at which the cost of the friction outweighs the actual results? After that, can

the exit be seen as a step back or a step forward toward a space where one's agency is no longer tied to a dysfunctional system? These are the questions I aim to address further throughout my conversations with the respondents.

Finally, there were those who assessed their impact and efficacy as considerably or very high. Interestingly, among them were both those who were in opposition to the majority/head of the council and those in good relationships with them. The former treated their position as a unique stance from which they could criticise and advance an alternative agenda, rather than victimising or distancing themselves. When combined with professional expertise and a certain amount of power, this is an example of agency through expert gatekeeping.

"I was an opposition deputy, and opposition is always 'fun.' At the same time, despite being in the opposition, I served as the head of the financial commission. Through my powers and recommendations, I brought to the council's meetings our refusal to recommend certain components [of a decision]. This was because I saw incorrect programs or an incorrect allocation of funds, and that is how we operated. So yes, I had an influence specifically at this level – as the head of the commission – and of course, as an opposition member, I would take the floor to justify why I made a particular decision" (R11).

The latter focused more on the conducive environment – institutional comfort – which was an important prerequisite for her efficacy. Also, worth mentioning is that she immediately started her answer by distinguishing between her first and second terms in the same village council: *"Perhaps I will speak more about the second convocation, because the first was a 'trial' experience. It was comfortable to work with both the first and the second [council] chairs" (R6).* First, this suggests the importance of the learning curve and the perceived sense of efficiency that grows with experience. Secondly, it can be hypothesised that perceived impact stems from procedural and institutional inclusion, as she further describes the specific ways she could personally engage in decision-making within her commission.

To summarise, this section outlined the pre-political and early political trajectories of respondents, leading up to the full-scale invasion. It demonstrated how the mandate (formal political participation) was primarily perceived and aspired to be a tool for scaling the impact of their prior activist backgrounds. The actual experience, and in particular the perceived efficiency

and impact, in some cases differed from expectations. However, whether through the 'fun' of expert-led opposition or the tactical mobilisation of the community against a 'shameful' majority, these women identified the mandate as a functional, albeit demanding, tool for agency. Exercising this tool came at the expense of 'third shift' burdens and frictions of a sometimes dysfunctional environment. However, this could be viewed rather as a stable, manageable baseline as long as the perceived positive impact outweighed the losses. The following section will demonstrate that the full-scale Russian invasion not only presented new challenges but also fundamentally recalibrated this threshold, leading to resignation.

4.3. Broken tool: when the mandate becomes an obstacle

While the respondents' pre-full-scale war perceived impact spanned a wide and diverse spectrum, it has been further modified and diversified after 24th February 2022, the day Russia's full-scale invasion began. The invasion created a vast number of 'new realities', each determined by both personal circumstances on one side and external conditions (such as proximity to the combat zone, the threat of occupation, etc.) on the other. For many who hold a mandate, it has been transformed from a functional tool into a burden or an obstacle to exercising their own agency. For some of those, it triggered a breaking point – the critical line where the cost of staying within the system becomes much higher than the value of the outcome. The variety of such cases will be further described and discussed in this section.

4.3.1. The border as a barrier to agency and a site for conflict of identities

"This wasn't some simple 'whim,' you know – I was forced to. The deputies didn't want me to leave; they said, 'Come back.' But the request was submitted, and the deputies supported me unanimously" (R6)

One of the most common reasons for resignations laid in the limitations and obstacles associated with crossing the national border⁵. While the reasons and needs for going abroad varied in each case, the necessity was universally inescapable and mostly connected with

⁵ From the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 to August 2025, female deputies of local councils who perform their duties on a voluntary basis could not leave Ukraine freely. In August 2025, the government updated the procedure: female local council deputies holding paid positions may travel only for business trips, while those in unpaid positions are not subject to any restrictions.

overlapping identities of a parent, volunteer or professional. For instance, one respondent shared a personal story that her son, during the siege of Mariupol⁶ by Russian forces, was taken into captivity. Together with other relatives of prisoners of war (POWs), they planned an advocacy trip first to Turkey and then to Poland. Right before leaving, she learned that she would not be able to do this unless she obtained certain permissions (which was also impossible in her case, since the reason was not among the valid reasons under the law). That was a breaking point for her to resign, even though it was not an easy decision to make:

"Our volunteer announced that we were gathering a group for a trip to Lublin. I was the first to say, 'I'm going.' And she asked me, 'Are you going to resign your mandate then?' Without hesitation, I said I would because I needed to go and represent the interests of both my son and other prisoners of war, as well as their relatives who are unable to travel or do not have the opportunity to speak or advocate there" (R6).

She also mentioned the border guards telling her, *'We understand you as a mother, but as a citizen of Ukraine, we cannot let you cross under any pretext'*. This particular phrase demonstrates the conflict of being both a mother and activist, while also being a citizen with certain commitments to the state. What makes it paradoxical, though, is that her intention to exercise her 'private' motherly duty was, in essence, a profoundly political and civic agency. This false dilemma of incompatibility of roles, which was posed to her, is very problematic – she was forced to stop being a deputy just to be the citizen and mother she wanted to be.

A few other participants in the study also mentioned that the obstacles to crossing the border were among the primary drivers of their decision to resign. For instance, R1 shared that, in her case, the overlap of two factors – border-crossing obstacles and the expansion of the Military Administration's power – shaped her decision. While being offered a position as office coordinator for an organisation that worked with Ukrainian migrants in Poland, she realised she would face challenges crossing the border freely whenever she had to travel for work or back home. At the same time, it was also clear to her that the regional council had quite limited access to the budget, which was mainly managed by the Military Administration. As she described it, she

⁶ Mariupol is a city in the south-east of Ukraine, which was a strategic goal for the Russian army since the beginning of the invasion. It was destroyed and fully occupied in May 2022. A lot of Mariupol's defenders still remain in detention as of April 2026.

“calculated for herself” that she could achieve more for Ukrainians there, in Poland, than here [being a local deputy] by just sitting around. In that sense, her decision was very rational and pragmatic – she did an audit of potential impact and chose where she could be more efficient.

The challenges of obtaining the required document for going abroad were even exacerbated when a deputy was in opposition to, or maintained a strained relationship with, the head of the council. In this case, the mandate was turned from a tool of public service to a reason of manipulations:

"I kept receiving invitations from abroad because I volunteer for an NGO, and our organisation was connected to many international charities. We were helping the military and IDPs, and since I speak several languages – Polish, English, and Danish – I was the person responsible for communication and delivery of supplies, food, and clothing. However, I had to obtain permission from our mayor [to go abroad]. When I brought him invitations from foreign foundations and submitted my application, it became problematic. He simply wouldn't provide an answer. It would drag on for months. If I had an invitation for July, for example, I would submit the request in May, but I'd have to chase him for two months straight, filing repeated appeals and even complain to the police that a deputy's inquiry is ignored. I had to fight for it with my bare nerves. It came down to threats – that I would go to court or go public with this. And I did. It was a fight, a lot of pressure. I was told: 'I'll give it if I want to, and if I don't want to, I won't.' It was pure manipulation. It was incredibly hard. Three times I managed to 'wrestle' that travel authorisation away from him, and then I decided I wanted to resign. And then the new resolution [was issued]⁷, thank God. But even this new resolution changed nothing.."(R4).

Again, as in the situations mentioned above, a respondent's⁸ choice was trapped between two competing forms of public good, both of which were supposed to be complementary.

⁷ Reference to the above-mentioned legislation that the government introduced in August 2025, which allows female politicians working on a voluntary basis to travel abroad.

⁸ R4 has not formally resigned yet, but she plans to do so in the nearest future.

4.3.2. Institutional paralysis: the rise of military administrations and the devaluation of the mandate

To begin with, the case to be described is rather extreme and shaped by the unique circumstances of the Zaporizhzhia region. Its exceptional nature and epistemic absence, however, are the reasons to make it visible, instead of ignoring it because it is not a common one. Zaporizhzhia is the region, 75% of which is occupied by Russia as of January 2026. Most of this territory has been occupied since the first months of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. This means that a number of local council deputies, based there, had to make a decision very quickly – either to be internally displaced or to risk being under occupation. Some of them were taken captive in the first days, then released on the condition that they leave the region immediately. This was the primary reason that the number of resigned deputies might be higher in that region than on average. In that context, the mandate was a physical target on one's back, especially if one had an active and visible pro-Ukrainian position.

After some time, the Regional Military Administration was established in the Zaporizhzhia region, and the Regional Council's activities were suspended by Presidential decree. R12 refers to it as *"a phenomenal, absolutely illegal act that doesn't fit into any laws on elections... We are nominally authorised, but our work is suspended"*. The difficulty of this case is that the suspension is a site of contested narratives. While the official justification for the Presidential decree cited the council's persistent failure to reach a quorum throughout 2023, a respondent within the council offered a different interpretation. From her perspective, the inability to convene was not due to deputy absenteeism but rather to deliberate administrative paralysis.

4.3.3. The calculus of resignation: mapping the breaking points

Beyond the structural obstacles that were the main triggers for breaking points, respondents' stories also constitute a wide constellation of individualised trajectories that led to resignations. Their stories suggest that the breaking point sometimes occurs when pre-existing political tensions converge with new, wartime-induced precarities. Despite each of them being unique in its nature, all of them suggest the decision to exit formal politics is never a spontaneous impulse, nor is it solely a case of being a victim of gendered circumstances (e.g. caring responsibilities), but rather a well-thought-out calculation of one's priorities, needs and perceived

impact. To further navigate the complexity of those trajectories, they will be grouped by the nature of the resources that were exhausted and triggered a breaking point. After the analysis, I identified that those that were depleted are institutional safety and agency; economic and emotional well-being; and functional utility.

A. Weaponised procedures, political sabotage and moral integrity

A few of the study participants reported resignations that were involuntary or even forced. For instance, the case R3 shared illustrates gendered political exclusion rooted not in professional failure but in a calculated move to diminish her influence over the council's decision-making. Crucially, this was triggered by R3's refusal to participate in or conceal the potential corruption. Therefore, procedural mechanisms were weaponised against her. This case also demonstrates that the wartime context was strategically utilised to deepen the fragility of a female politician who lacked the economic means to protect herself against systemic sabotage.

"Because they [the opposing deputies] realised the Mayor listened closely to my point of view – at that time, only the Mayor, myself, and the Chief of Staff were truly running the council – they decided they needed to weaken me. To do this, they united to issue a vote of no confidence against me as the Council Secretary. The first time they tried, the Mayor vetoed the decision. However, they then joined forces with the opposition to reach the two-thirds majority required to override the veto. They succeeded and removed me from office. Technically, I could have sued them because there were no legal grounds for a 'failure to perform duties.' But since I don't have a legal education and lacked legal support, I couldn't fight them. So, they removed me from the Secretary position" (R3).

Similarly, the experience of R11 suggests that political pressure might be the main driver for the involuntary exit. Unlike the previous story, this respondent was placed in a situation where she had to choose between her moral values and her mandate. Weighing the priorities and also assessing the potential perceived impact she can have, even after resigning from formal politics, she made a decision in favour of her values.

" – How did this thought [of resigning] arise?

– It was when I was told: '[respondent's name], you are smart, and you say the right things, but here you must vote exactly like this.' This wasn't the influence of the full-scale

invasion itself; it was the influence of yet another redistribution of roles among big politicians. Even from the opposition, I was told: 'Okay, we are no longer the opposition; now we are part of the pro-government coalition. You are right that the prices here are inflated, but this decision must be passed.'

– So, this was mostly political pressure.

– Yes, exactly. It was definitely political, and it was... I refused to compromise my conscience. At that moment, I saw my weight and productivity being much greater in the social sphere and volunteering than in the political arena." (R11)

This story also demonstrates that moral integrity can be a breaking point for exit when it is put in danger. Importantly, neither respondent regretted their choices and final decision.

B. Balancing public duty against personal livelihood

In contrast to the political pressure described above, this section will focus on how accumulated exhaustion, combined with economic precarity, might be a breaking point for change. When we began the conversation, R7 shared that her initial motivation was rooted in a desire to serve her community, with a clear acknowledgement that leadership would require a degree of self-sacrifice. However, five years later (the expected duration of the term), she realised that the scope of work was constantly expanding, with new war-related challenges on the horizon; the sabotage from the colleagues grew; the emotional labour and pressure became unbearable, and instead of gratitude from the electorate, you gain only criticism. Furthermore, the need to manage both deputy's activity and a full-time job complicates the situation.

"It requires so much... it's like a form of service. When you have good intentions, it's a service, but it's often a kind where you aren't creating anything; instead, you are constantly fighting everything. You fight with the residents, you fight with the other deputies, you fight with those people behind the scenes who pull the strings, you fight with everyone. And all of this is real service, and it's completely unpaid" (R7).

The final catalyst for her decision was the intersection of this multidimensional exhaustion with the financial aspect. As her husband joined the army, the family's financial stability became more precarious. Thereby, as she concluded, she was no longer able to prioritise the community over

her own livelihood: *"I have to earn a living for us now"* (R7). All these factors combined, the service becomes impossible at some point.

C. To stay or to leave: negotiating the utility of the mandate

Finally, the strategy of exit discussed in this section is characterised by re-evaluation of one's perceived impact and substantive representation. For R5 and R9, the breaking points were the moments when they realised their mandates did not serve their initial goals. However, their responses that followed the realisation were completely different.

After the full-scale invasion began, R5 was pregnant and decided to immediately flee abroad for safety. However, she did not intend to resign, and after being informed that the regional council session was called, she travelled all the way from Belgium to attend it. To her disappointment, the session was postponed at the last minute due to insufficient quorum.

"After it was postponed, I went back to Belgium because I had left my eldest child there. After that, I simply didn't want to make that journey again. That became the breaking point. I saw no activity, no initiative from the regional council. I didn't initiate anything myself during that period either... we met online for commission meetings, but we just talked about general things" (R5).

Her disappointment with institutional infrastructure stagnation became a breaking point for her, as she herself noted. Her approach to the final decision-making was very rational and well thought out – she mentioned doing a SWOT analysis. This suggests that she was actually willing to sacrifice her comfort (for example, travelling long distances while leaving a younger child abroad and being pregnant) if her participation in a council was not merely descriptive but substantive. Holding a 'hollow' mandate, however, was not under her consideration as it contradicted her values and did not make any sense to her.

"If it were a question of me actually being able to influence something, I would have, perhaps... at least, I would have put a 'plus' [in the SWOT analysis] regarding my return to Ukraine" (R5).

R9's story depicts a whole different perception and reaction to similar circumstances. Although her conditions – having a full-time job in Kyiv, a shift, or rather expansion, of professional influence to international cooperation and municipal recovery broadly; having a child abroad, and still

facing obstacles to crossing the border – could be viewed as valid justifications to resign, she chooses to retain the mandate. As she explained, there is a reason for that:

“It’s not just the party’s wish; it’s my internal desire to remain socially active. If you received a mandate and the support of voters, you should try to finish what you started to the best of your ability. Moreover, it’s a fascinating experience because we are constantly undergoing local government reforms; we can see in practice what isn’t working and then communicate that information more broadly” (R9).

This reasoning can be interpreted as (1) institutional responsibility – completing the term as a matter of following the social contract; (2) strategic learning and advocacy – her position as a deputy provides her with valuable ‘living laboratory’ experience where she can still apply broader ideas and projects she now focuses on. The latter also gives her a certain degree of legitimacy needed for her work at the national and international levels.

4.4. Relocating agency: informal political participation after resignation

“In principle, globally, nothing changes for me; it’s just a question of where I’m doing a good deed” (R1).

This section provides an overview of respondents’ career paths after resignations and their future political plans. It will start by outlining the landscape of their new roles and answering the question of *what they do now*. Then, it will explore their perceived efficiency, impact and freedom in those positions, providing us with an understanding of *how they evaluate their new roles*. Finally, it will examine their future trajectories and aspirations in formal/informal politics to gauge *where they are headed*.

4.4.1. Mapping the shift: professional paths after resignations

The act of resigning from a local council does not necessarily signify a withdrawal from the public sphere. On the contrary, for many respondents, the exit from formal politics became a strategic relocation of their agency. *Figure 6* provides an overview of respondents’ professional paths after their decision to resign. As we can see, all of them maintain a high level of social and political influence through their activities. They continue to shape the public sphere through volunteering, NGO leadership, and community organising – all those acts that, according to

Balbon's continuum of political participation, would be situated on the side of informal political participation.

Figure 6

Current professional and civic activities of participants of the study.

	Council level	Activity after resignation
R1	Regional council	Charitable foundation officer; supporting IDPs, refugees, and stateless persons in Ukraine and Poland.
R2	City council	NGO founder and chair; civil society activist monitoring local government; member of municipal working groups; volunteer for a defense support initiative.
R3	Village council	Head of a charitable foundation; founder of a women's support center; chair of the regional "Women, Peace, and Security" (1325) coalition.
R4	City council	Volunteer for organizations supporting bereaved military families and IDPs; international coordinator for women and children displaced by war.
R5	Regional council	Project manager and policy developer for refugee integration, social activation.
R6	Village council	Civic activism supporting mothers and wives of Prisoners of War (POWs) and those Missing in Action (MIA).
R7	Village council	Informal community mediator supporting local grassroots initiatives.
R8	Regional council	Civil society activist and university lecturer.
R9	City council	Lead in international and inter-municipal cooperation projects.

Note. Created by the author based on the interviews conducted within this research.

Apart from the general tendency to remain socially active, a few other observations can be made based on the table summarising respondents' answers. Firstly, we can talk about a noticeable wartime-aligned agency: all those who switched to NGOs or charitable foundations, or who work as independent activists, concentrate their activity on humanitarian and social responses to the full-scale war. Whether they work with IDPs and refugees (R1, R4, R5), with families of Prisoners of War (POWs) and Missing in Action (MIA) (R6), do military volunteerism (R2), or do advocacy work abroad (R9), their commitment to war's social consequences was a common theme in our conversations. Secondly, even after resignation, they preserve and build on their social and political capital. For example, R2 shared how she exercises her influence without holding a mandate:

"I continue to be a 'thorn in the side' of the city council and the mayor, despite having resigned, because NGOs also possess certain resources of influence ... Do I still have a

connection to the city council? Yes, I do. Do I enter those doors? Yes. I am a member of various working groups. My level of access to the city council remains quite high. However, I do not attend sessions, and I no longer participate in their 'collective irresponsibility'."

Her story perfectly demonstrates that the act of resignation itself is not an escape from social responsibility, but rather a search for spaces where she can exercise this responsibility and her own agency more freely and effectively. Furthermore, the trust they gained from the electorate remains the same, as described by R7, who is still de facto the deputy (as the council refuses to vote for this decision to be passed) but does not perform her duties:

"As of now, I remain in touch with the community; when they reach out to me, I redirect them to the right people, provide contact numbers, and so on. I support the local activists – certain processes in the community are still ongoing – but I do not attend village council sessions, and I plan to continue fighting for my right to resign my mandate".

Finally, some of them even expanded and up-scaled their activities (R5, R9), which disproves the bias that resignation is necessarily a step back.

4.4.2. Evaluating their decisions and impact in new roles

Having discussed respondents' career shifts and new professional activities, it was important for me to explore their perceptions of their current efficiency and freedom, and to generally hear their reflections on their new roles. Therefore, they were asked whether they feel more "free" and more influential now than during their time in office. The answers varied significantly among respondents; hence, there cannot be a single, simple answer to this. While some of them sometimes have second thoughts and nostalgia for tools that the mandate gave them, they do not mourn the loss of status itself.

Some respondents mentioned that the mandate served them as a multiplier for certain opportunities, such as access to donors, grants, a floor for institutional international cooperation, and access to decision-making processes. These doors, which could be opened from a formal position, would help scale the impact of their activities, as respondents argue. However, access to these opportunities comes at the expense of a certain amount of freedom and independence in action, and vice versa. Therefore, it is always a trade-off between these two.

"I know that if I were a deputy, I could have achieved much more. Although we are already doing a lot – that's for sure. It's just that more could be done on an international level because I could attract donors and grants. I could help more people... I could have supported both medicine and culture. I have extensive life experience and many realised plans that could be promoted within the community. Sometimes this thought slips in, so to speak. [On the other hand], I think that if I were a deputy, perhaps certain political forces would restrain me or give me 'assignments' – because I know they used to do that. They would give tasks: 'you must vote for this decision this way.' Here [outside the council], I am, of course, more independent" (R3).

This dilemma is complicated further by the notion of perceived productivity and efficiency. As before entering politics, after exiting it, women continue to calculate cost-effective strategies, where positive social impact is the main currency.

"In a way, let's say, I regret it – well, not exactly regret, but I look at things and think: 'My God, I could have already done that; if I were still there, I would have already accomplished this and that.' But on the other hand, I realise that I am much more productive now, and I can do much more useful work at this moment" (R1).

Finally, some respondents shared regrets, but at the same time, they acknowledged resource (either time or finances) scarcity, which made it impossible for them to remain in a formal political role. R6, for instance, talked about the 'third shift' burden that rendered the combination of paid professional work, caring responsibilities and formal political participation unsustainable.

"Sometimes I regret it, but [only] if I think about combining rather than just comparing. If you try to combine the first, the second, and the third, you eventually have to give something up. Because it simply takes too much time".

In contrast, some respondents expressed no hesitation or regret regarding their decision to exit the office. Their main argument was that their new roles enabled them to be more effective and influential without the council's formal constraints and procedural sabotage.

"At that moment, I saw my weight and productivity as being much greater in the social sphere and in volunteering than in the political arena" (R2).

For them, the transition is perceived as an upgrade in terms of positive impact, rather than as a withdrawal or step back.

4.4.3. Aspirations, intentions and plans regarding a comeback to formal politics

The final question I asked my respondents was about their long-term plans in politics, in particular, whether they intend to return to their prior roles in a post-war election cycle. Their responses ranged from aspirations to aim for executive roles to intentions to avoid politics due to a number of personal and structural barriers.

The most striking finding for me was that those who expressed willingness were very confident about aiming for higher positions, despite all the challenges and obstacles they mentioned earlier. Nor was their current shift to informal political participation perceived as a permanent exit from the political stage. On the contrary, for some, their current activities were perceived more as a stage through which they gained certain capital to elevate their political ambitions and aim higher for the future. For instance, R2, while answering this question, highlighted two important moments: first, the trust and support from the local community, which is one of the most defining drivers for her, and second, the accumulation of needed skills and experiences that would strengthen her position in the future:

"Truthfully, yes, I am considering this aspect [of applying as a local deputy]; I am being encouraged toward this path by the people around me. In 2022, when the full-scale invasion began, I headed one of the largest volunteer hubs at the time. Even then, people started talking – because the mayor was absent. She had left and only returned directly on the day of the vote. People began suggesting to me that this is what a mayor should look like. So, it is primarily the community that pushes me toward these thoughts. I am considering the possibility that in future elections, I would likely try something, but with different positions and the different experience I have gained over these four years. I would enter [the political arena] again with entirely different 'input data' than before" (R2).

Similar intentions were expressed by R3, who would refuse to return to the previous position, as she considers it too limiting. It signifies that her political ambitions not only remained but also transformed into a demand for substantive representation.

"Therefore, I see that I am currently doing more here [in my current role] than the local authorities are doing. But I don't want to go back just to be a deputy. Because I know that as just a deputy, I will accomplish very little, much less than what I am doing now. I want to run for Mayor (Head of the community), because if I become the Head, then I will be able to truly implement [my plans]" (R3).

Being 'just a deputy' is not enough for her, as mere formal presence (descriptive representation) will not make the difference she wants to make. R9 also expressed her intention to continue her journey in formal politics and to consider applying to become a member of parliament.

Some respondents, however, discussed various obstacles that make their political future rather unlikely. One of those barriers is time scarcity and financial challenges. As a local deputy is an unpaid role, those holding it mostly combine it with a full-time job. Navigating between these two, not even mentioning reproductive labour, is a significant challenge. As R1 argued, being a hired employee and an effective deputy is nearly unrealistic, whereas being a deputy in name only does not align with her values. She further notes that for those whose jobs offer greater flexibility, particularly businessmen, combining two roles is more feasible. This poses a critical question – who is the deputy role designed for? Is it realistic to expect women to take the 'third shift' in addition to the 'double shift' they already carry? This is an important argument for better understanding that women's entry into formal politics is complicated not merely by stereotypes but by structural exclusions.

"Give or take, half of your working week has to be dedicated to being a deputy. And who needs an employee who drops out for half the working week? It is always a question of prioritisation. Just going there to 'push a button' – that's definitely not for me ... I understand that for those in business, it's easier; they can manage their time more freely. Or for many lecturers, when you effectively have half a day free, you can somehow operate within that. But for someone who is simply a hired employee, it's unrealistic to me" (R1).

For those forced to flee abroad, the decision to return to their former roles or not is complicated by additional factors such as successful integration abroad over time. As R5 shared, she is unlikely to apply for a deputy position again for two reasons – first, her current primary identity as a mother does not allow her to relocate her already integrated kids again, and second,

she herself has also integrated and settled down quite well. Considering the number of women with kids who temporarily fled abroad and have lived there for more than four years, this scenario should not be treated as an individual exceptional case, but instead should be considered as a potential system weakness to be addressed.

Finally, one respondent shared that she is unlikely to return to formal politics because it requires 'playing games', which does not match with her values.

"What is politics to me? For me, it was a tool to somehow change the life of my community for the better. Now I understand that I am not ready to use this tool to its full extent. Because politics still has certain 'rules of the game,' and they won't change in our reality anytime soon... For me, politics is not the right tool right now. I see other instruments that synchronise better with my methods of work" (R7).

However, she further notes that, even though she will not apply in the next 5 years, she will do her best to promote other worthy candidates. This, again, is an example of how women can be formally outside the office but still interested and engaged in what is going on inside it. This does not imply that women's presence in cabinets is not important, but rather suggests that it can be expanded and noticed beyond formal decision-making spaces. Thus, this section provided an overview of the various professional trajectories that former deputies map out. While for some, the context of a full-scale invasion and the challenges associated with it became a catalyst for accumulating resources (skills, experience, social capital) for re-entry, for others, it became a turning point to exit with no return.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper sought to answer the question of what happens to women's political agency in wartime, when the institutional ground shakes. Some female deputies resign. But can it be inferred that they exit the political arena forever? By exploring the professional trajectories of 9 female politicians who have chosen to resign their mandates after the full-scale Russian invasion, the study challenged the prevailing binary logic – either in office or out of politics. Respondents' stories demonstrated that formal resignation does not signify the end of political participation but instead presents new ways to exercise it. Furthermore, it does not slacken future political aspirations and can even strengthen and validate them. Therefore, the act of resignation itself should be viewed as rather a forced relocation of one's agency.

Quantitative data collected within the research indicate that the gender composition of local councils at different levels has not changed significantly over the past 6 years. The dataset from the Central Election Commission provided gender-disaggregated data on the composition of 1577 local councils at three timestamps: 2020, 2022 and 2026. It demonstrates that the 37% to 63% ratio of women to men has remained stable over time despite overall changes in the number of deputies. This data, however, cannot map the scale of individual resignations due to the party-list replacement mechanism. Also, it cannot capture the individual circumstances and experiences that lay behind the numbers and led to resignations.

To map the 'breaking points' as well as professional shifts thereafter and long-term plans, the qualitative part of the research was conducted. It consists of 9 semi-structured interviews with female deputies of local councils who either resigned their mandates or still hold them for various reasons but remain de facto inactive. Based on the analysis of those, it was concluded that resignations were shaped by a number of overlapping factors, including border-crossing obstacles, political pressure, the expansion of the Military Administration's power, and accumulated exhaustion, combined with economic precarity. Importantly, for all respondents, the decision to exit formal politics was never a spontaneous impulse, but rather a well-thought-out calculation of one's priorities, perceived impact and efficiency.

As research findings suggest, the latter – perceived impact and efficiency – was among the most defining factors in the shift in participation. By leaving political offices, they did not give up

their social responsibility and commitment, but relocated it to spaces where they could exercise it more freely and effectively. This argument is supported by their new roles – all remain active in shaping the public and social spheres, while some have even expanded their roles. Furthermore, many of them intend to return to their previous roles or even to higher positions (e.g., mayor, member of parliament), and they view their current positions as a strategic move to accumulate the resources needed for future upward political mobility.

These insights are crucial for challenging the traditional dichotomous approach to measuring political participation used in standard metrics such as the Global Gender Gap Index or the Gender Equality Index. They imply a deceptively simple logic relying solely on formal politics – presence counts, absence does not. This numerical approach prioritises descriptive representation over substantive, while also ignoring that a few women can be ‘critical actors’ if they have ‘feminist consciousness’. Also, it overlooks that women in informal politics can perform ‘critical acts’ when formal politics fails to provide them with the space and conditions to do so. Therefore, the forms of latent political participation, or, as argued, informal political participation, should be taken into account.

Therefore, this research makes several contributions to the scholarly work it engages with and to further research. First, it offers empirical evidence for Ekman and Amna’s typology of political participation in a wartime context, where martial law is in effect, and numerous existential risks exist. Secondly, it shows that the continuum of political participation, suggested by Balbon, need not imply that women’s movement across it is necessarily linear and upward – instead, it can be rather fluid and full of friction. Third, the paper also reconceptualises resignation, framing it as the relocation of one’s agency. Fourth, the reconceptualisation prompts further reflection on the methodological approach to measuring women’s political participation. It encourages exploring the balance between attention to political work outside formal politics and the importance of women’s formal political representation. Finally, it points to a few avenues for further research: now that we know why women resign, how do we explain men’s resignations? Are there breaking points different from those experienced by women? Another one is looking into the future and asking, "What happens after the war?" Will those women who

currently have plans about formal politics convert them into formal representation in the post-war electoral cycle? Will there be enough support and a conducive environment for the re-entry?

In terms of practical and policy recommendations, three suggestions can be proposed based on this research. First, at the legislative level, as suggested by one of the MPs, Bill No. 11300 would make a significant step forward by introducing the legal definition of 'sexism', removing the residency requirement for applying for a deputy position, and strengthening the gender quota mechanism (Zmina, 2025b). Second, the findings suggest a need to continue investing in political training for women, both current deputies and those engaged in informal political participation. Importantly, these programs, even if supported by international funding bodies, should be tailored to the war and post-war contexts and provide relevant information to participants rather than merely carry the mainstream agenda. Finally, there is a need to formalise the political participation of Ukrainian women displaced abroad, as one respondent suggested. It should be acknowledged that the number of such highly educated women, with rich prior experience, motivation and political ambitions, who fled abroad and relocated their lives for an undefined period, is huge, and it cannot be guaranteed that they will return to Ukraine when it is possible. Therefore, instead of leaving their participation to chance, it should be a state-level priority to create a formal institutional infrastructure to enable them to exercise their political agency even when they are outside the country. This might include expert groups for human rights advocacy within the Ukrainian diaspora, networks for international advocacy to push for Ukraine's integration into the EU, strengthening sanctions against Russia and providing humanitarian support. By formalising this, the individuals' relocated agency can be further converted to transnational political influence.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies usage

I acknowledge the use of AI tools, in particular, Gemini, ChatGPT, and Claude, for different purposes while writing this research essay.

Gemini:

- To translate interview quotes from Ukrainian to English.
- To translate and transliterate the names of the references that were in Ukrainian for referencing in APA style.
- For translation broadly, when it was needed for adapting visuals that were originally created in Ukrainian.
- To revise parts of the text and suggest ways of improving the style of writing.

ChatGPT:

- In the early stages of the research, to help structure the outline, brainstorm feasible research questions and the overall structure of the paper.

Claude:

- To read and interpret the quantitative data, in particular, to identify its methodological limitations.
- To discuss the structure of the conclusion.

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Appendix A

The guide for semi-structured in-depth interviews with resigned female politicians in English (translated) and Ukrainian (the original)

Introduction: Introduction of the researcher, study objectives, obtaining oral informed consent, and permission for audio recording.

Block 1: Context and Background (Pre-Feb 2022)

1. **Personal History:** Reflecting on the time before the full-scale war. When and why did you decide to enter politics?
2. **Pre-war Focus:** What were the primary areas of your political activity/interest before the invasion?
3. **Perceived Agency:** How was your experience working in the council/administration before 2022? Did you feel you had a real impact on the community's life?

Block 2: The Point of Destabilization and Reasons for Resignation

4. **Contextual Shift:** When the full-scale invasion began, the working context changed drastically. What changed specifically for you (daily routine, workload, major challenges)?
5. **The Turning Point:** Can you recall the specific moment you first considered resigning? What was the primary trigger?
6. **Decision-making Process:** Describe the circumstances of your resignation. Was it a sudden decision or a cumulative effect of issues over time?
7. **Hypothesis 1 (Double Burden):** Did you have to balance political duties with care work, such as evacuating family or providing for relatives? How did this affect your capacity to hold office?
8. **Hypothesis 2 (Military Administrations):** With martial law, many powers shifted to Military Administrations. Did you feel the space for civilian political activity or local governance shrank or became marginalized?
9. **Hypothesis 3 (Restricted Mobility):** Between 2022 and August 2025, female local councillors (who serve pro bono) faced foreign travel bans. Did this factor into your decision? Did it limit your ability to perform duties, volunteer, or see family?

10. **Hypothesis 4 (Emotional Burnout & Bureaucracy):** Did you feel constrained by formal bureaucracy, believing you could be more effective/impactful as a grassroots volunteer or activist?

Block 3: Informal Participation vs. Formal Exit

11. Current Role: What is your life and professional focus now?
12. Sense of Influence: If you are volunteering, do you feel more "free" or influential now compared to your time in office? Did you feel relief from reduced public pressure/scrutiny after leaving?

Block 4: Political Future and "Reverse Mobility"

13. Conditions for Return: Under what circumstances would you consider returning to formal politics? What systemic changes are necessary for this to happen?
14. Gender Backlash Risk: International research suggests a risk of returning to "traditional roles" post-conflict. Do you fear the post-war political landscape might become male-dominated again, despite the massive role women play currently?

24.02.2022

Представлення, коротко про дослідження, усна згода і дозвіл на запис розмови

Блок 1: Контекст та передумови (До 24.02.2022)

1. Згадайте себе до повномасштабної війни. Коли і чому ви вирішили піти в політику?
2. Якими були ваші основні фокуси в діяльності до повномасштабного вторгнення?
3. Як вам працювалося в *раді/адміністрації* до 2022 року? Чи відчували ви, що маєте реальний вплив на те, що відбувається в громаді?

Блок 2: Момент дестабілізації та причини складання мандату

3. Коли почалося повномасштабне вторгнення, контекст роботи кардинально змінився. Що саме змінилось конкретно для вас?
 - *Як змінився робочий день? Чи змінилось навантаження? Якими були найбільші виклики?*
4. Спробуйте згадати момент, коли ви вперше подумали про складання мандату. Що стало тригером/причиною?
5. Розкажіть про умови, в яких ви приймали рішення про складання мандату. Чи було воно миттєвим чи мало накопичений ефект (ви розглядали цю можливість тривалий час)?
6. **Гіпотеза 1 (чинник «подвійного навантаження»):** Чи доводилося вам поєднувати політичну роботу з евакуацією близьких? Наскільки це впливало на можливість працювати на посаді?
7. **Гіпотеза 2 (чинник «військових адміністрацій»):** З введенням воєнного стану багато процесів перейшли до військових адміністрацій. Чи відчули ви, що простір для депутатської діяльності або цивільного управління якось змінився чи звузився?
8. **Гіпотеза 3 (чинник «обмеження мобільності»):** Від початку повномасштабного вторгнення до серпня 2025 депутатки місцевих рад, що працюють на громадських засадах, не могли виїжджати за кордон навіть під час законної відпустки. Чи впливав цей фактор на ваше рішення скласти мандат? Чи обмежувало це вас від

повноцінного виконання своїх повноважень/волонтерської діяльності/можливості бачитися з рідними?

9. **Гіпотеза 4 (чинник «емоційного вигорання»):** Чи було відчуття, що на посаді ви обмежені бюрократією, а будучи волонтеркою чи активісткою, ви могли б принести більше користі?

Блок 3: Неформальна участь vs Формальна втрата

10. Чим ви займаєтеся зараз? Що змінилось у вашому житті?
11. Якщо ви волонтерите, чи відчуваєте ви себе більш вільною та/або впливовою у діяльності зараз ніж на посаді депутатки? Чи відчували ви полегшення після виходу з формальної політики через зменшення публічного тиску?

Блок 4: Політичне майбутнє та «Зворотна мобільність»

12. За яких умов ви б розглянули можливість повернення в формальну політику? Що для цього мало б змінитися в самій системі?
13. Дослідження війн в інших країнах кажуть про ризик повернення до традиційних ролей після завершення війни. Чи є у вас побоювання, що після війни політичне поле знову стане переважно "чоловічим", попри ту величезну роль, яку жінки відіграють зараз?

Appendix B

Data

on the gender representation of deputies elected to local councils
In the local elections of October 25, 2020

	Number of councils where elections were	As of 31.12.2020					As of 23.02.2022					As of 12.03.2026				
		Total number of deputies elected, including	Men		Women		Total number of deputies elected, including	Men		Women		Total number of deputies elected, including	Men		Women	
			n	%	n	%		n	%	n	%		n	%	n	%
Oblast councils	22	1659	1214	73,18	445	26,82	1655	1207	72,93	448	27,07	1617	1168	72,23	449	27,77
District councils	119	5349	3495	65,34	1854	34,66	5343	3492	65,36	1851	34,64	5210	3426	65,76	1784	34,24
Kyiv City Council	1	120	86	71,67	34	28,33	120	86	71,67	34	28,33	119	86	72,27	33	27,73
City councils	369	11076	7405	66,86	3671	33,14	11107	7411	66,72	3696	33,28	10865	7194	66,21	3671	33,79
District-in-city councils	15	562	319	56,76	243	43,24	561	322	57,4	239	42,6	555	326	58,74	229	41,26
Settlement council	428	10218	6344	62,09	3874	37,91	10254	6355	61,98	3899	38,02	10054	6225	61,92	3829	38,08
Village council	623	13787	8096	58,72	5691	41,28	13915	8180	58,79	5735	41,21	13649	8049	58,97	5600	41,03
Total	1577	42771	26959	63,03	15812	36,97	42955	27053	62,98	15902	37,02	42069	26474	62,93	15595	37,07

Source: data provided by the Central Election Commission of Ukraine. Translated from Ukrainian by the author.