

Citizen engagement as a crisis response at higher education institutions in the Baltic states and Ukraine

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Abstract

This publication presents social actions organised in Baltic universities in collaboration with policy, industry, and society, aiming to support Ukrainian populations in humanitarian crises. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many Ukrainians had to leave the war zone and emigrate to other countries in order to find a safe place to live. This humanitarian crisis imposed new challenges for Ukrainian people who became refugees in the Baltic states, as well as to the host societies. There was a lack of resilience mechanisms to cope with this new reality and provide support for Ukrainian refugees. To address these challenges, six partners (four Baltic universities, a Ukrainian university and an organization in Greece) collaborated in the project "Supporting Ukraine through citizen engagement at Baltic Universities" (Baltics4UA) under the Erasmus+ Programme. The main goal of Baltics4UA project is to enhance Baltic universities' social responsibility through civic engagement actions to address the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis in the Baltic states. A methodological approach that focuses on citizen engagement and emphasises social innovation and participation has been developed in the framework of this project prior to organising 23 university-driven social actions in every partner institution. Overall, 488 participants took part in social actions. Participants were asked to fill in a post-event evaluation form; this feedback was used to identify whether the social actions met the aims and objectives of the project. Moreover, the organisers of the social actions described the impact of each action by evaluating the aim and goal of the social action, as well as the level of

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citizen engagement. While planning, organising and implementing these social actions, project partners encountered a variety of challenges and learned lessons, which can serve as useful guidelines for those seeking to foster effective business, academia and society collaboration while providing support and engaging societies in the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis.

Keywords

Social actions, citizen engagement, quadruple helix actors, humanitarian crisis, resilience.

1. Introduction

Many Ukrainian citizens have been forced to leave their homes in search of safety in other locations since the start of Russian assault against their country. For Ukrainians, the Baltic states have served as a safe place since February 2022. Many of them are seeking a permanent home in the Baltic states, and by facilitating their integration into society, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania can also mutually benefit from this endeavour (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023). The most common issues Ukrainian refugees face are mental health problems, including depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A study conducted among Ukrainian refugees in Poland revealed that a staggering 73% of respondents exhibited symptoms of these distressing conditions (Długosz, 2023). In addition to psychological issues, Ukrainian refugees face a variety of other challenges related to integration aspects, such as: finding a place to live, learning a new language, and understanding host-country systems, including educational aspects. The successful integration of refugees is described as a two-way process which has three interrelated dimensions: legal, economic, and socio-cultural processes (Integration of refugees in Estonia: Participation and Empowerment, 2016). To address the current situation, Baltic universities took part in initiatives that assist communities of Ukrainian refugees in meeting their needs and achieving successful integration.

1.2. Baltics4UA project goal, participating institutions, and expected results

Since the beginning of the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis, the need for resilience mechanisms and practices in Baltic universities has been identified. The goal of the project “Supporting Ukraine through citizen engagement at Baltic Universities” (Baltics4UA) under the Erasmus+ Programme is to enhance Baltic universities’ social responsibility through civic engagement actions to address the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis in the Baltic states. The Baltics4UA project started at the beginning of 2023 and was initiated by Tallinn University (TLU, Estonia).

One of the partners in this project is Lviv Polytechnic National University (LPNU) from Ukraine. As this project focuses on European HEIs' resilience during refugee crises, the participation of LPNU provides an opportunity for all partners in this project to get insights into the barriers and difficulties Ukrainian HEIs are currently facing. Other partners in this project are based in countries that are also directly affected by the Ukrainian refugee crisis: Lithuania (Kaunas University of Technology, KTU), Latvia (University of Latvia, LU), and Estonia (University of Tartu, UT). Moreover, another participant in the Baltics4UA project is Web2Learn (W2L), an organization established in Thessaloniki, Greece. It is a business partner that operates at the crossroads of open innovation and business-academia cooperation. Web2Learn brings together academic (and in general, educational) partners in fruitful research, development, and service design collaborations with business partners.

The partner universities began by preparing a landscape analysis of citizen engagement initiatives for Ukraine organized by Baltic universities. Secondly, citizen engagement actions were carried out by all partners. The aim of these citizen engagement actions was to enhance HEIs' resilience and cooperation with policy, industry, and society in humanitarian crises, as well as to empower academic staff, students, and citizens to actively engage in social actions to support Ukrainian populations in the Baltic states. In the final phase of this project, the main focus will be devoted to the capacity building of HEIs through the organization of experience cafés, the production of open access educational materials for academic staff, and the release of a podcast series in which HEI staff involved in citizen engagement actions will share their experiences. The aim of this last phase of the project will be to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and business-academia cooperation that will allow citizen groups, stakeholders, and universities to build strong resilience models in humanitarian crises.

1.3. The Baltics4UA project's relevance for citizen science

The Baltics4UA project ensures resilience in Baltic HEIs through open innovation and collaboration of quadruple helix actors: science, policy, society, and industry. A variety of open and innovative practices (hackathons, art events, public lectures, networking events etc.) are organized and implemented in order to build sustainable resilience when facing challenging social conditions. In the Baltics4UA project, partners act as mediators by unifying and enabling effective collaboration between representatives of science, policy, society, and industry.

According to Haklay (2021) it is challenging to define citizen science and it is defined differently, depending on the context. The complexity of this term can be illustrated by a huge variety of definitions. European Citizen Science Association defines citizen science projects that involve citizen science in scientific endeavour that generates new knowledge or understanding. While Australian Citizen Science

Association provides a broader definition of citizen science, indicating that it involves public participation and collaboration in scientific research with the aim to increase scientific knowledge, and that it is a great way to harness community skills and passion to fuel the capacity of science to answer questions about the world and how it works. Whereas Citizenscience.gov suggest an even more advanced definition of citizen science where the public participates voluntarily in the scientific process, addressing real-world problems in ways that include formulating research questions, conducting scientific experiments, collecting, and analysing data, interpreting results, making new discoveries, developing technologies and applications, and solving complex problems. All these definitions emphasise citizen engagement and public participation solving real life challenges.

The real-world problem Baltics4UA project participants are addressing are the challenges that Ukrainian refugees are facing after the full-scale Russian military invasion to Ukraine in February 2022. In order to help Ukrainian refugees to overcome these challenges Baltic universities organised World café discussions in academic communities and identified what are the general, educational, and cultural needs of Ukrainian people currently living, working or studying in the Baltic countries, as well as what kind of support is needed in the field of research and what support is necessary for Ukrainian citizens who remained in the country. Discussion participants were quadruplex helix actors: policy makers, researchers, representatives of industry, and citizens. The discussions allowed to identify the needs of the target group – following up, the participating universities organised citizen engagement actions applying the methodology by Butkevičienė et al. (2021), targeting citizen engagement in socio-environmental issues and prioritising social innovation and participation.

The Baltics4UA project empowers ordinary citizens – students, higher education staff, and local communities – to take part in activities providing support and humanitarian aid to Ukrainian refugees in the Baltic states at local, regional, national, and European levels. To this end, students and higher education staff develop skills and knowledge of innovative and sustainable learning and teaching practices, and also gain opportunities to develop competencies on how to effectively respond to societal and humanitarian crises. Furthermore, inter-institutional collaboration is highly encouraged in this project. The lessons learnt about citizen engagement in this project will be of value to citizen science initiatives.

2. Rationale

Prior to delving into the steps taken by the Baltics4UA partners, it is crucial to outline the theoretical framework that guided the implementation of the actions. The research process for the Baltics4UA project was structured around the quadruple helix model, an innovation framework that integrates four major

sectors – academia, industry, government, and civil society – to foster collaborative innovation and socio-economic development. Academia contributes research and educational resources, industry brings practical applications and economic insights, government provides policy support and regulatory frameworks, and civil society offers grassroots perspectives and community engagement. This model enhances innovation by ensuring that diverse stakeholders are involved in the co-creation and dissemination of knowledge and solutions. It emphasizes the importance of collaborative networks and the synergies that emerge from these multi-sectoral partnerships. By engaging these four sectors, the quadruple helix model aims to address complex societal challenges through a holistic and inclusive approach (González-Martinez et al. 2023). This framework enabled the Baltics4UA project to take a comprehensive multi-dimensional approach to enhancing university-driven social responsibility and civic engagement in response to the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis. By leveraging the strengths and resources of these four sectors, the project aimed to develop resilient and sustainable solutions to the challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees and to empower academic staff, students, and citizens to actively participate in social actions.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Baltics4UA methodology for university-driven social actions

This section presents the methodology through which the identification, selection, and analysis of the social actions have been carried out. To develop a rigorous methodology for our social actions – one that would better reflect and enhance citizen engagement for a social purpose – we adopted the methodological approach of Butkevičienė et al. (2021) for two reasons: a) its focus on citizen engagement in socio-environmental issues based on a case studies analysis, b) its emphasis on social innovation and participation, – two elements associated closely to the scope of the Baltics4UA project.

The identification of Butkevičienė et al’s 2021 case studies approach enhanced the development of the Baltics4UA “Methodology for the design, implementation and assessment of citizen engagement as crisis response at Baltic HEIs” (WP2A6) (Oikonomou, Boichenko & Zourou, 2023). The Baltics4UA methodology served as a common framework and step-by-step guide for the partnership to plan, organise, carry out and evaluate their social actions. Key components of the Baltics4UA methodology include the identification of a) levels of citizen engagement; b) types of social participation, and c) target groups of the actions.

3.1.1. Levels of citizen engagement

The Baltics4UA project foresees enhancing university-driven citizen engagement practices and actions that will build stronger and sustainable collaborations

between academia, business, and society. Within this framework, we engaged in research to identify the most relevant typology of levels of citizen engagement. To this end, we adopted the typology outlined by the World Bank Working Group on Citizen Engagement (2015) that distinguishes four levels of citizen engagement, namely:

1. **Information:** Citizens are recipients of information by external stakeholders.
2. **Consultation:** Institutions receive citizens' feedback with citizens' role being limited to this one-way interaction.
3. **Collaboration:** Citizens are called to contribute to the process in a two-way interaction scheme.
4. **Empowerment:** Citizens are initiators and strategic organisers of the actions.

These levels represent a spectrum of engagement, from passive receipt of information to active participation and leadership in crisis response initiatives. By employing this tiered approach to engagement, the project sought to maximise citizen participation and foster a sense of ownership and agency among all stakeholders involved in the crisis response.

As the Baltics4UA project aims to maximise citizen participation and engagement, we highly encouraged partners to design social actions that achieve at least a "consultation" level engagement with participants.

3.1.2. Types of social action

To foster a common understanding of social actions among the Baltics4UA partnership, we outlined a typology of social actions upon which partners could choose their preferred type(s). The typology was first introduced in the open access publication "Baltic universities fostering citizen engagement through social actions for Ukrainian refugees" (Zourou & Oikonomou 2023a), and it was also adopted in the study "European universities tackling the Ukrainian refugee crisis: insights into grassroots digital actions" (Zourou & Oikonomou 2023b) in the framework of the Erasmus+ AGILE project. The typology was built upon a) our emphasis on the citizen participation dimension of the actions, and b) a first categorisation of actions made by Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) for Ukrainian refugees and students. The VMU categorization served as the basis for the typology adopted, which contains the 18 items presented below:

1. Citizen Science
2. Hackathon
3. Crowdfunding
4. Crowdsourcing
5. Do-it-yourself
6. Art event (theatrical plays, music concerts, exhibitions etc.)
7. Scholarship
8. Tuition free studies
9. Free accommodation
10. Psychological counselling
11. Podcast
12. Campaign

13. Public lectures
14. Legal counselling
15. Networking event
16. Summer camp
17. Educational equipments
18. Working/Research group

3.1.3. Target groups

Building capacity and resilience of Baltic and Ukrainian universities to deal with the ongoing humanitarian crisis resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine necessitates collective action-taking and collaboration among stakeholders, both within and beyond academia. The Baltics4UA project adopts the call for solid cooperation between quadruple helix actors to maximise the impact and sustainability of the project’s social actions.

In this context, the primary target groups of the actions were identified by the partnership as: a) university students, b) university staff, c) Ukrainian refugees and/or internally displaced persons, d) Baltic and Ukrainian citizens.

The project recognized the distinct needs of these groups, ranging from the need for academic support and integration for students and staff, to the immediate humanitarian needs of refugees, and the general societal need for resilience and solidarity. By identifying these target groups and understanding their specific needs, the Baltics4UA project could tailor its citizen engagement actions to effectively address the varied aspects of the humanitarian crisis.

3.2. The process of identifying and planning the Baltics4UA social actions

The implementation of this methodology involved a systematic process of planning, executing, and evaluating citizen engagement actions. To ensure alignment of the identification and planning process of the social actions, the Baltics4UA methodology included a detailed outline of steps to be taken. Specifically, Baltics4UA partners followed a 9-step methodology that entailed:

- 1) defining their target groups,
- 2) developing an engagement strategy,
- 3) considering inclusion and diversity issues,
- 4) defining the level of citizen engagement,
- 5) identifying the type of social action,
- 6) creating an implementation plan,
- 7) training their staff,
- 8) assessing the impact of their action, and
- 9) disseminating and sharing best practices.

To facilitate the planning of the social actions, a dedicated checklist was created and shared with partners as part of the Baltics4UA methodology, while a post-action survey was also built for partners to evaluate the impact of their case

studies. The Baltics4UA methodology and its instruments are available open access in Oikonomou et al. (2023).

This structured approach ensured that the engagement initiatives were aligned with the project's objectives and the specific needs of the target groups into 23 social actions on the four levels of citizen engagement:

- information – nine actions
- consultation – three actions
- collaboration – 10 actions
- empowerment – three actions

Three of the information level actions also included elements of collaboration.

4 Description of social actions carried out in HEIs in participating countries

This section outlines 23 social actions carried out by the project partners in the participating countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine) and online. The actions are ordered according to the levels of citizen engagement outlined in Section 3.1.1: information, consultation, collaboration, and empowerment.

4.1. Information level of citizen engagement

4.1.1. Action 1. Film screening “Who are we? Psychoanalysis of Ukrainians” and post-film discussion (Estonia, UT)

Type of social action: Art Event

The University of Tartu organised a screening of the film “Who are we? Psychoanalysis of Ukrainians”. The objective of the event was to enhance the international community's knowledge of the Ukrainian nation. The event was structured into three parts. The event kicked off with introductory remarks shedding light on the movie, the director, and the Baltics4UA project. Subsequently, a compelling video clip sent by the director was screened. Following this, the audience watched a 1.5-hour movie. The event concluded with a round table discussion where in-house experts from the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies who are involved in teaching and managing the program ‘Central and Eastern European, Russian and Eurasian Studies’ offered reflections on the film, shared their perspectives, and fielded questions from the audience. We organised this event together with an Elektriteater cinema in Tartu and Oleksandr Tkachuk, the creator of the film, who is currently on the frontline defending Ukraine from Russian aggression. The main target groups were students and staff from UT and the Ukrainian community in Tartu. The event lasted 2 hours and 15 minutes, and altogether 48 students, staff, and members of the Ukrainian community in Tartu participated.

4.1.2. Action 2. Public lecture “Information war: Industry 4.0 enabled technologies to ensure freedom, security and justice” (Lithuania, KTU)

Type of social action: Public lecture

The aim of the 1-hour lecture was to educate the community on innovative technologies implemented to ensure the resilience of society and governance structures to information warfare threats in the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine. Researchers from the Digital Investigations Lab – Frog Lab at KTU Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts were invited to give a public lecture to the university community. The target group of this social action were members of KTU academic community and Kaunas citizens. In total, the social action reached 14 participants comprising researchers, students, and librarians, as well as citizens of Ukraine who are currently studying at KTU.

4.1.3. Action 3. Volunteer event organised in cooperation with Caritas organisation “Discover yourself as a volunteer” (Lithuania, KTU)

Type of social action: Public lecture

Caritas is an international Catholic organisation and one of the largest organisations in Lithuania providing humanitarian aid to Ukrainians affected by the war. KTU reached out to Caritas representatives and it became clear that the organisation currently is short of volunteers. For this reason, the organisers decided to plan an event and invite Caritas representatives to present the organisation’s activities and volunteering opportunities. The target group for this event was the students of KTU gymnasium. In Lithuania, secondary school students are required to volunteer with an organisation of their choice. For this reason, it was decided to organise an event for gymnasium students and inform them about the opportunities to volunteer in an organisation that provides humanitarian support to war-affected Ukrainians. The event lasted for one hour and 25 KTU Gymnasium students and librarians who are interested in volunteering participated.

4.1.4. Action 4. Public lecture “Leadership in times of crises” (Latvia, LU)

Type of social action: Public lecture

This action aimed to raise awareness of collaborative governance, which has emerged as a pivotal approach in addressing the inclusion of Ukrainian citizens into Baltic universities. The approach brings diverse cultural perspectives, experiences, and skills to the academic and social community, and allows diverse viewpoints to be integrated into the university’s decision-making processes, leading to more innovative and effective solutions in education, research, and community engagement. By actively engaging Ukrainian citizens in governance, the University of Latvia can foster a sense of community, resilience, and solidarity. This approach not only benefits Ukrainian students and staff, but also enriches

the university community as a whole, promoting cross-cultural understanding and mutual support. Actions like this also prepare citizens for involvement in potential citizen science projects in the future. The lecture lasted for 2 hours in January 2024 and there were 14 participants in the action (two professors and 12 MA students in the programme of public administration).

4.1.5. Action 5. Ukraine Treasure Hunt (Estonia, UT)

Type of social action: Networking event

The aim of the event was to bring together the Ukrainian community and the academic community for the shared purpose of exploration and dialogue about Ukraine-related places in Tartu. Participants were divided into groups of four for the first part of the event (1 hour) to explore the prepared spots around Tartu that were presented to the participants in Google Maps. After the first half of the event, participants returned to the auditorium to discuss the landmarks that they visited. This part was led by invited expert Michael Cole – a journalist and editor from ERR (Eesti Rahvusringhääling – Estonian Public Broadcasting) and researcher at UT – who delivered a presentation and overview of Ukraine-related spots and facilitated the discussion. The target groups were students and staff at UT and Ukrainian refugees displaced as a result of the Russian invasion. There were 25 participants in the action, including students, business and teacher representatives, coming from Ukraine, Estonia, Egypt, Georgia, and Kazakhstan.

4.1.6. Action 6. Beata Kurkul's exhibition "Fighting Ukraine" (Lithuania, KTU)

Type of social action: Art event

KTU organised an exhibition of the work of artist Beata Kurkul, a Lithuanian citizen who has been living and working in Kyiv, Ukraine, since 2008. She works as a 2D artist and creative director in a computer game development studio in Ukraine. Since 2014, when the hybrid war with Russia started, Beata's husband has been volunteering. Beata helped him, and started drawing Ukrainian border guards and then other military structures. Together with the Ukrainian Border Service, numerous exhibitions have been organised at various Ukrainian border units, as well as at the war zone in Mariupol (2016). Beata visited the war zone several times. We decided to invite Beata Kurkul to present her exhibition to remind the community about the war in Ukraine and to highlight its heart-breaking consequences for the Ukrainian people. The target group of this social action were members of the KTU academic community and citizens of Kaunas. The exhibition lasted for several months. The target audience was the university community and special attention was given to the most senior administrators directing the academic affairs of the KTU (vice-rectors, deans, managing directors), international students, librarians. In total there were 38 registered attendants. In

addition, the rector of KTU participated in the opening of this exhibition and expressed his great support to Beata Kurkul and all Ukrainian people.

4.1.7. Action 7. Public Lecture “Ukraine Indomitable: How Ukrainians Keep Standing During the War?” (Estonia, UT)

Type of social action: Public lecture

Level of citizen engagement: Information, with elements of collaboration during the Q&A

The action’s objective was to raise awareness about Ukrainian societal resilience, discuss the challenges that Ukrainian society faces, and how the people of Ukraine exhibit resilience in the face of Russian aggression relying on horizontal ties. The event was structured into two parts. The first part was the lecture delivered by Oleksii Kolesnykov – a Ukrainian citizen, and Bucha resident who witnessed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Oleksii is a member of the Association for Community Self-Organization Assistance in Ukraine, and he currently holds the position of Research Fellow in Political Studies at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies. The second part was a Q&A session moderated by Catherine Gibson – Lecturer in East European and Eurasian Studies – providing an interactive platform. Participants delved deeper into the discussed topics, sought clarifications, and shared their perspectives.

4.1.8. Action 8. Meeting with the Ukrainian Ambassador, His Excellency Maksym Kononenko (Estonia, UT)

Type of social action: Public lecture and Networking Event

Level of citizen engagement: Information, with elements of collaboration during the Q&A

The objective of the event was to facilitate a direct engagement with the Ukrainian Ambassador to gain first-hand insights into the latest advancements in Ukraine's pursuit of European integration. The event was structured into three parts. The first was the lecture delivered by Mr. Ambassador Maksym Kononenko, who was appointed the Ambassador of Ukraine to the Republic of Estonia in March 2023. The open lecture was followed by a Q&A session, moderated by an analyst from the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies. The meeting was then concluded by the informal gathering with the guests of the event. The event lasted for 90 minutes and there were 29 participants, consisting of students and university staff.

4.1.9. Action 9. Film screening of “A Letter to Ukraine” and post-film discussion with the director (Lithuania, KTU)

Type of social action: Networking event

Level of citizen engagement: Information with collaborative elements, as there was also a discussion during the event during which both the author of the documentary and the participants mutually shared their thoughts and insights

KTU organised a film screening to show a documentary produced by the Lithuanian filmmaking community about the various civic initiatives that have taken place in Lithuania to provide humanitarian aid to war-affected Ukrainians. The mission of this non-profit initiative is to raise awareness on human rights issues around the world and to connect them to those that are present in Lithuania. KTU contacted the filmmakers, and one of the directors agreed to come to the screening. During the event, the director of the film talked about the idea, behind the scenes and the meaning of this film. The target group of this social action were members of the KTU academic community and Kaunas citizens. Thirty three attendees participated in the event from the KTU community (students, researchers, alumni, and librarians).

4.2. Consultation level of citizen engagement

4.2.1. Action 10. Youth debate tournament at the War Museum (Latvia, LU)

Type of social action: Networking event

The University of Latvia organised an educational event for BA students, focusing on the ongoing war in Ukraine and exploring ways to support Ukrainian citizens, including students. This event took place at the War Museum, chosen for its capacity to provide historical context and deepen the understanding of warfare's impacts, thereby fostering a reflective and informed discussion among participants. The visit to the War Museum was designed to give students a vivid impression of the harsh realities of war, including its historical precedents and the human cost associated with such conflicts. The exhibition served as a powerful visual and educational tool, prompting students to reflect deeply on the current situation in Ukraine and its implications for peace, security, and human rights. In this context, the event provided a structured platform for students to offer their insights, opinions, and feedback on the discussed topics. However, the role of the participants was primarily limited to providing this feedback without a direct role in decision-making or implementing the discussed solutions. This focus aimed to engage young, academically inclined individuals who are in a critical phase of developing their understanding of global issues, critical thinking, and public speaking skills. The action took place over 2 days (4 hours + 1.5 hours) and involved 25 BA students from the University of Latvia.

4.2.2. Action 11. Public lecture and discussion about local government challenges in Ukraine during the war (Latvia, LU)

Type of social action: Public lecture

This social action aimed to inform citizens about the challenges local governments face in Ukraine and give them an opportunity to discuss ways of helping the Ukrainian local governments, as well as reflect on the lessons learned or possible actions for the local governments of Latvia. This consultation process engaged citizens by providing them with comprehensive information on the challenges confronting local governments in Ukraine. Additionally, it fostered an active discussion, encouraging citizens to contribute insights and perspectives on potential solutions and the implications for local governance in Latvia. In total, there were 30 participants and they represented students from different years from the Faculty of Social Science.

4.2.3. Action 12. Debate about documentary film “Ukrainian Storybox – Voices of War” on voices from Ukraine during the war (Latvia, LU)

Type of social action: Campaign

The University of Latvia organised a debate about a documentary film showing the struggles of Ukrainians during the war. The participants have watched the documentary and discussed how people in Ukraine use social media and record their own stories. They also shared ideas about what items everyone should keep at home for emergencies, not just during war. Additionally, they talked about ways to help animals during conflicts and how people from other countries can offer support. In total, 15 students from the University of Latvia participated in the action.

4.2.4. Action 13. Survey of Ukrainian students (Estonia, TLU)

Type of social action: Working/research group

There was a lack of knowledge about the needs and situation of refugee students in Tallinn University; some information about support systems was offered on the university website but it was not known whether it meets the needs of students. To address this need, 5 TLU students participating (including one Ukrainian student) in the LIFE course conducted a survey over a period of 1 week and the target group was the 81 Ukrainian students studying at TLU. A total of 36 students (44%) participated in the survey from various fields of study, with the most popular being humanities, politics and governance, and cultural studies. Students were asked about their general satisfaction, challenges and suggestions for improvement related to studying at TLU. The results were reported on the LIFE website and discussed in LIFE final seminars, and given to representatives of university students.

4.3. Collaboration level of citizen engagement

4.3.1. Action 14. Students' seminar about engaging Ukrainian pupils into educational institutions (Estonia, TLU)

Type of social action: Networking event

The target group of this event were students who are studying in Youth Works study programme at Tallinn University. The main objective was to find out how Estonian youth work institutions responded to the Ukrainian crisis. The first-year students of Youth Work study programme collaborated with different youth institutions, learning about methods, and environments. They also mapped the activities and tools which were in use to engage Ukrainian refugees in Estonia. The workshop lasted 3 hours and was attended by 20 participants.

4.3.2. Action 15. Roundtable on "The vector of values as the main direction of influence in involving citizens in humanitarian aid in crisis situations" (Ukraine, LPNU)

Type of social action: Working/ Research group

The speakers at the roundtable were experts from different fields, but their research focuses on developing a holistic approach to the issue of the values vector as the main direction of influence on the involvement of citizens in humanitarian aid in crisis situations. All the speakers have extensive experience in engaging the academic community in crisis response. In particular, Olga Romanenko, PhD in Economics, State University of Trade and Economics, was one of the first Ukrainian academics to evacuate Ukrainian scientists from the cities attacked by Russia. Petro Baikovsky, PhD in Political Science, Ukrainian Catholic University, is an active researcher of European space policy. Richard Bunka, Chairman of the Latvian Bar Association, is a researcher of the European integration process who works closely with Ukrainian academics and political scientists. It was decided to invite these speakers and organise the format of the event as a roundtable to share experiences and identify values as one of the factors influencing motivation to act in crisis situations. The target group of this social action were members of the LPNU academic community. The event was attended by the interested academic community of LPNU, as well as student activists. A total of 20 participants were engaged.

4.3.3. Action 16. Brainstorming session on "The role of the academic community in engaging citizens in humanitarian aid" (Ukraine, LPNU)

Type of social action: Working/ Research group

The main idea of the event was to engage active students in solving humanitarian problems. Student youth both in Ukraine and around the world are an active driver of change in society. The event involved undergraduate students of LPNU. This generation of students is defined by the fact that they have been in crisis

situations for the last years of their lives, as they have been challenged by various crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic (2019) and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022). This generation, despite their young age, already has significant experience in engaging the society in crisis situations, as most of them have been and remain active volunteers today. For this reason, it was decided to organise a brainstorming session for students. The target group of this social action were members of the LPNU academic community, as well as student activists. A total of 25 participants were engaged.

4.3.4. Action 17. Case study championship “Social Communications as an Effective Tool for Involving Business in Humanitarian Aid” (Ukraine, LPNU)

Type of social action: Working/Research group

The main idea of the event was to identify the factors and mechanisms of business involvement in humanitarian aid using social communications. It was held in a case study championship format. In the modern world, the business community is increasingly aware of the importance of its contribution to solving social problems and supporting humanitarian initiatives. Universities may be interested in promoting initiatives that contribute to the practical learning of their students, as well as to the development of social sciences and humanities. This event stems from the general trend towards social responsibility of business, the need for innovations to attract financial support for humanitarian projects, and the desire of universities to promote practical learning for students. This event is a response to the need for global public initiatives to collaborate with business and academic institutions to develop humanitarian projects. The target groups of this social action were staff and students of the LPNU, in particular, students majoring in Social Communications were involved in the development of the cases. The experience of the audience and speakers during the roundtable discussion summarised the findings of the study that can be used for further research on citizen science in general or its areas. A total of 26 participants were engaged from LPNU, as well as student activists.

4.3.5. Action 18. Webinar "Psychological support for citizens in humanitarian aid in crisis situations" (Ukraine, LPNU)

Type of social action: Working/Research group

The academic community and students of the LPNU have experience of living and studying in a crisis situation, including the one caused by the war (since 2014), like no other. Despite this, they remain an active source of help for other citizens and all those in need, using the achievements of science and developments obtained during scientific research. This is what determined the topic of this event. One of the key prerequisites for holding such a webinar is the need for psychological support and the growing psychological stress among Ukrainian citizens in crisis situations caused by the war. The webinar discussion allowed

participants to identify effective methods of overcoming psychological problems in crisis situations that serve the educational and informational purposes of citizen science. The target groups of this social action were staff and students of the LPNU and a total of 18 participants were engaged.

4.3.6. Action 19. The Cosmic Hackathon “Baltic Universities’ students for Ukrainian cultural heritage protection through space data and Earth observations” (online, Web2Learn)

Type of social action: Hackathon

The NASA Space Apps Challenge 2023 is a global event organized by NASA, consisting of multiple hackathons hosted in various locations worldwide. The Dnipro event, one of these hackathons, was hosted by Noosphere in an online format. During the Dnipro hackathon, Web2Learn organized a specific challenge supported by Space4CC co-founders and the National Observatory of Athens. This particular event aimed to enhance the awareness and skills of Baltic and Ukrainian students in safeguarding Ukrainian cultural heritage. The target participants were students, staff, and stakeholders from Baltic and Ukrainian universities, including business representatives. The event spanned two days and focused on intensive collaboration among participants to achieve the hackathon's goals.

Web2Learn’s Challenge hosted two teams, each comprising six members, including students and researchers from Baltic universities, Greece, and Ukraine, and two expert mentors for these teams (14 participants in total). This diverse participation highlighted the international and interdisciplinary approach to addressing the hackathon's objectives.

4.3.7. Action 20. Hackathon on “Young professionals using space data to safeguard Ukrainian cultural heritage” (online, Web2Learn)

Type of social action: Hackathon

Web2Learn hosted a challenge for Baltic and Ukrainian university students, similar to action 19, with both actions focusing on using geo and space data to safeguard Ukrainian cultural heritage. However, action 20 was part of the DigiEduHack 2023, a global series of hackathons aimed at solving educational challenges using digital technologies that brings together educators, students, innovators, and entrepreneurs to collaborate on creating solutions for various educational issues, fostering innovation and creativity in the education sector. This event engaged students from Baltic and Ukrainian universities in using advanced technological resources for preserving Ukrainian cultural heritage amidst conflict. Unlike the Dnipro event, which was part of the NASA Space Apps Challenge 2023, this hackathon emphasised educational innovation and creativity in the education sector.

The primary goal of the hackathon was to document and analyse the impact of the ongoing conflict on Ukraine's cultural heritage, employing innovative methods for preservation and documentation. The hackathon was supported by Earth observation experts, co-founders of Space4CC, and the National Observatory of Athens, who provided mentorship and guidance.

This event differed in team composition and the projects they prepared, which pursued different goals. Participants in the hackathon included 12 students from the Baltic countries, Greece, and Ukraine, working under expert mentorship. This event offered a concise yet intensive platform for learning, innovation, and solution development over two days, similar to the Dnipro event but within the framework of DigiEduHack 2023.

This diverse group of young professionals brought together a wide range of skills and perspectives to tackle the challenge.

4.4. Empowerment level of citizen engagement

4.4.1. Action 21. Folk dance workshop (Estonia, TLU)

Type of social action: Art event

The aim of this action was to assist with the social integration of Ukrainians into Estonian society by promoting positive interactions and building social connections. The target groups were young Ukrainian war refugees (aged 11-14) in Estonia and Estonian residents (aged 9-11). The workshop also extended its impact to the families of the participants. Key collaborators included folk dance groups and their teachers, who were actively involved in planning and executing the program. A pre-event took place in Tallinn University at EduTeckHack in November 2023, and the main activity – a folk dance workshop – took place the following month for two hours. In total, 31 children took part in the main workshop: 15 were Estonians and 16 Ukrainians. In addition, the teachers of each group were actively involved.

4.4.2. Action 22. “Spend a day with me” language tandem (Estonia, TLU)

Type of social action: Do-it-yourself

Recognizing that language barriers hinder refugees' access to the labour market and their ability to handle daily tasks such as shopping, seeking medical care, and attending school, Tallinn University organized an initiative to support foreigners' integration into a new culture and language space by offering mentoring and simulating everyday situations. Eight Ukrainian refugees residing in Estonia participated in the mentoring (offered by 5 TLU students during the LIFE course) and they entered the programme based on their interest and personal connections with the organizers who discovered that almost every Estonian around had contact with a Ukrainian refugee in some capacity. The meetings,

where refugees could practise everyday language in informal settings, took place over two months.

4.4.3. Action 23. LIFE course on citizen engagement actions to provide humanitarian aid or educational support to Ukrainians in Estonia and Ukraine (Estonia, Tallinn University)

Type of social action: Do-it-yourself

LIFE (*Learning in Interdisciplinary Focused Environment*) is an interdisciplinary mandatory course where students from different study fields carry out a collaborative project on a topic of their interest. Three lecturers at TLU prepared and offered a LIFE course related to the Baltics4UA project. The course lasted one semester and was worth 6 ECTS, equating to 156 academic hours. Students from different study fields who are interested in the topic were encouraged to apply. The aim for a project was to develop and create (prepare, organize, run, evaluate, analyze and report) support activities for engaging citizens to provide humanitarian aid and /or educational support to Ukrainians in Estonia and in Ukraine. Students could take into account the results and methodology of the Baltics4UA project. In total, 15 participants were accepted to the course and were divided into three smaller groups based on their interest. Each group had a supervisor. Several seminars for all the groups were organised by supervisors, and the mid-term session and presentations were organised by the university.

5. Impact

To measure the impact of the social actions, as part of the post-event evaluation and feedback, the participants were asked whether the activities met the aims and objectives that were set by the project. The post-action survey was implemented for 16 activities out of 23. The quantitative summary of the feedback reflects the general impact of the activities based on the participants' self-reflections. As there are few answers, they are not separated depending on the length, type, or profile of participants, nor other features of activities.

All partners asked participants to fill the post-action survey, which consisted of six agreed-upon questions to measure the impact of the social activities. There were 448 participants who took part in different activities, and 31% of them (138) gave feedback. In some cases, the feedback form was translated into the participants' native language if needed (e.g. in action 21, the folk dance workshop, the feedback form was translated into Estonian and Ukrainian, and participating children could fill it in in their preferred language).

There was an open-ended question about whether the activity met the needs of the participants. Eighty five percent of the participants declared that the activities met their expectations. Participants were asked to rate on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (5 being the most likely) how likely it was that they would participate in a similar

action in the future, and the average score was 4,8. As an open-ended question, we asked whether participants have any motivation or interest in engaging in actions that address a social purpose. Seventy percent of the respondents declared they have an interest in engaging in social actions, with some of them describing their general interest in such a field, and some others stating that their participation depends on the concrete purposes and context.

Participants were asked how much the action helped to increase their motivation or interest in engaging in university-driven initiatives for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees, and answers were collected in a Likert scale by offering the following options: Not at all, Slightly, Very much, I’m not sure. 63 % of the respondents (82 people) agreed that the action increased their motivation and interest very much, 21% (22 people) slightly, 14% not sure (19 people), and 2% (three people) assessed that the activity did not motivate them into action at all (see Figure 1).

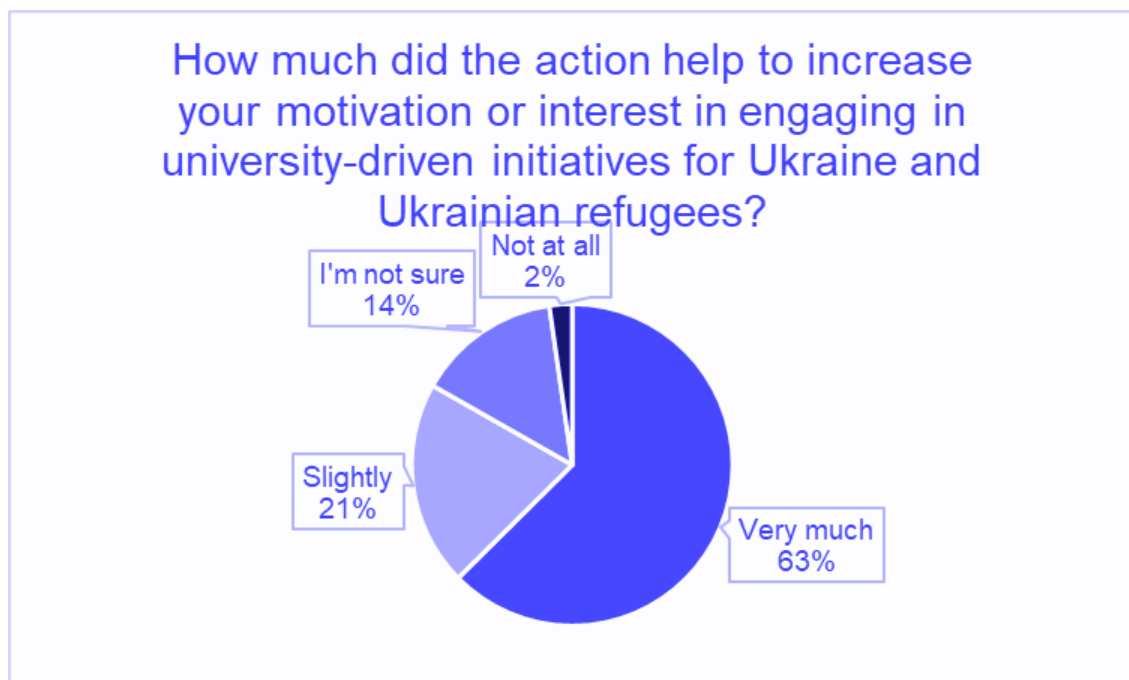


Figure 1. Post-action survey respondents' answers to the question about the activities impact their motivation and interest to take part in the university-driven initiatives.

47% (60 people) of the respondents would definitely recommend participating in a citizen engagement action for a social purpose to a friend or colleague, 35% (44 people) would probably do that, 6% (eight people) definitely not, 3% (four people) probably not, and 9% (11 people) were not sure about it (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Post-action survey respondents' answers to the question recommending similar participation to a friend or colleague.

Participants' general satisfaction with the event or action was 9,1 measured in a Likert scale of 1 (not satisfied at all) to 10 (very satisfied).

In addition, the organisers of the actions were asked to describe the impact of each action taking into account the concrete aim and goals of the action, and the level of citizen engagement applied for each. The assessments in free forms were analysed in a qualitative way. In total, there were 3 actions which applied the participation at the highest level, and were aimed to empower the participants – the actions were organised by Tallinn University (see Table 1).

Table 1. The actions which applied the highest level of participation – empowerment.

The name of the action	Objectives of the action	Impact of the action
Folk Dance Workshop, action 21	To establish meaningful social bonds by using shared interests in national culture.	The children's response to the folk-dance workshop event was inspiring and positive, highlighting the importance of cultural exchange and understanding. Their feedback highlighted the following positive aspects: 1) the joy of sharing culture, 2) strengthening friendship and tolerance, 3) emotional engagement, 4) desire to participate in similar events.
Language peer-to-peer support "Spend a day with me", action 22	To help Ukrainian refugees engage with the Estonian language in everyday scenarios in order to foster language acquisition and ease cultural adaptation.	Ukrainian refugees who took part in the project reported that they got more information about the areas they were interested in, e.g. further study possibilities in Estonia, sports, arts, job seeking, etc. The students who organized the activity learned about teamwork, and also acquired new knowledge about Ukrainian culture and the challenges encountered by Ukrainians in Estonia, as well as about Estonian structures and the basics of language support.
LIFE course for planning activities to support Ukrainian refugees in Estonia, action 23	To bring together students from different curricula to find out the best activities to support Ukrainian refugees in Estonia.	Students led their own activities to make a difference, including finding the activity, target groups, and implementing the activities. Students learned about group dynamics, team work, and working to help refugees.

The activities drove participants to take an active role in the community to support Ukrainian refugees. After participation in these activities, students were engaged to be proactive and organised three different activities for, and together with, Ukrainian refugees in their city. Two of those activities – the folk dance workshop and language peer-to-peer support “Spend a day with me” – contributed cumulatively to participants' empowerment to take an active role as citizens in their resident country.

6. Challenges and lessons learnt

The project partners faced various challenges in organising events and activities before and during the events. Some of them were foreseen in advance, but some of the challenges were completely unexpected and required flexibility and adaptation to the changed situation.

The organising teams faced some difficulties in engaging stakeholders and identifying their interests and needs. The Lithuanian partners identified that, as the public lecture was given by academics (LT, Public lecture, Information Warfare: Industry 4.0 Technologies for Freedom, Security and Justice, action 2), the title and description of the lecture may have been too academic and incomprehensible to some of the event participants. Some participants asked for clarification before the event as to what the lecture would be about. Afterwards, the organisers realised that the event title and description needed to be simplified and shortened, as the lecture was not aimed at academics but at the general public, who may not be familiar with some of the concepts known to scholars. A similar situation was identified by the Estonian partners in action 8 (EE, UT, Public lecture and Networking Event, Meeting with the Ukrainian Ambassador). According to them, a significant challenge also revolved around anticipating the Ambassador's delivery style during the lecture, which, for the most part, leaned towards a formal presentation rather than an engaging discussion. However, this was effectively addressed through the subsequent Q&A session, injecting vitality into the discussion. Additionally, the informal reception, purposefully designed for casual interactions, provided a valuable opportunity for participants to engage directly with the Ambassador. Latvian partners faced a similar situation in their efforts to establish effective cooperation with researchers and master students, which included aligning objectives, and managing expectations (LV, UL, Public lecture "Leadership in times of crises", action 4). This required significant effort in communication and negotiation to ensure all parties are committed and contributing effectively to the shared goals. During the action, keeping participants engaged was difficult, as engagement strategies need to be dynamic – and it was early Saturday morning. For the future, social actions could benefit from more flexible scheduling and the use of interactive technologies to facilitate participation regardless of physical location or time constraints.

Challenges have arisen in coordinating communication and cooperation between various stakeholders. According to the Latvian partners, organising a youth debate tournament presented significant challenges, particularly in establishing effective cooperation with partners and ensuring access to target groups (action 10, LV, UL, Youth debate tournament at the War Museum). The Latvian partners also experienced challenges in action 11 (LV, UL, Public lecture and discussion about local government challenges in Ukraine during the war), while establishing cooperation between the student council, Erasmus students, and researchers

from other relevant organisations. The Estonian partners also faced some challenges related to differences among participants in action 23 (EE, TLU, LIFE course on Citizen engagement actions to provide humanitarian aid or educational support to Ukrainians in Estonia and Ukraine). Participants were from different study fields, and they have different rhythms in study programmes, so it was difficult to manage to bring everyone together at the same time and to the same room. Students needed to be self-directed and autonomous in their group work but it was not always smooth. The Estonian partners also stressed that reaching Ukrainian students was challenging and highlighted the importance of communication with the administrative staff and finding the person who was responsible (action 13, EE, LTU, Survey researching Ukrainian students at Tallinn University).

The Greek partners highlighted the engagement of Baltic university students as one of the main challenges, given the online format and the intense nature of the two-day hackathon (action 20, GR, Web2Learn, Young professionals using space data to safeguard Ukrainian cultural heritage). Time constraints posed a significant challenge, as participants had to quickly assimilate complex information and collaborate effectively to produce viable solutions.

Language was also a challenge that the project partners had to overcome when organising events. According to the Estonian partners, one of the primary challenges in action 1 (EE, UT, Movie Screening “Who are we? Psychoanalysis of Ukrainians”) was ensuring universal accessibility for the movie, given that it was in Ukrainian. To address this, they needed to incorporate English subtitles. Although the movie was openly accessible, obtaining the director's consent was crucial. The Latvian partners also identified language-related challenges when organizing action 10 (LV, UL, Youth debate tournament at the War Museum). Given that the students involved were international students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including Ukrainian students, ensuring that all participants had sufficient English language proficiency to engage fully in the debates was a challenge. English, serving as the lingua franca for the event, required participants to not only understand complex topics related to war and peace, but also to articulate their thoughts, arguments, and feedback effectively in a non-native language. This could potentially hinder some students' ability to participate fully and express themselves as clearly as they might in their native language. The Greek partners also identified the language barrier as the main challenge they faced during the event and the time available for the team to coordinate and cooperate was limited (action 19, GR, Web2Learn, The Cosmic Hackathon). To overcome language barriers, the University of Latvia recommended offering language support through translation services or language workshops to enhance inclusivity and engagement. Tallinn University emphasised the effectiveness of communicating with participants in their native language to

increase citizen engagement, despite acknowledging the additional efforts required to organise multilingual events.

Organising events and activities requires a certain level of flexibility and the ability to change opinions and behaviour. The Estonian partners realised that it was very important to develop their understanding of multiculturalism and refugees' status in action 14 (EE, TLU, Students' seminar about engaging Ukraine pupils into educational institutions). During the practice students often met the attitude that there is no special attention for refugees needed and that the refugees should participate on a regular basis, like all other young people. Students tried to change this attitude by providing suggestions for youth organization workers on how to engage Ukrainian refugees in Estonia.

A key lesson drawn from the Baltics4UA project underscores the importance of seeking feedback from individuals engaged in social initiatives. Many organisers noted a considerable lack of responses to post-event surveys from participants. LPNU (UA) suggested that the subdued response could be due to the significant demands on the academic community, potentially leading to overlooking survey notifications amid other important communications. A suggested solution to this issue involves sending polite email reminders prompting survey completion after the event. KTU (LT), after Beata Kurkul's exhibition (action 6), concluded that post-event surveys could be disseminated not only via email, but through other means of communication, such as a QR code with a link to the survey on the exhibition description page, or leaflets.

Two events led to changes in participants via movie screenings and discussions afterwards. The documentaries shown were based on true stories and aimed to introduce Ukrainian culture and the circumstances in Ukraine during the war. Moving pictures are evocative and the participants experienced strong emotions, and felt a sense of closeness to the Ukrainian people. The desire and motivation to become an actor in social activities was kindled during these sessions.

On the other hand, organisers observed that participants readily provided feedback immediately following the events. This highlights the necessity of careful planning to determine the most effective methods for gathering feedback from participants and offering positive reinforcement. Such positive feedback fosters a sense of community cohesion and encourages continued engagement in future social endeavours.

After action 17 (LPNU, Case study championship), the organisers and participants collectively agreed to continue crisis response sessions to explore sustainable solutions. This demonstrates a favourable outcome indicating the lasting benefits of social initiatives. This could be pointed out as a good practice to start continuous collaboration.

Several initiatives targeted the youth demographic, including students and schoolchildren, such as TLU (EE) Folk Dance workshop for children aged 9–14 (action 21) and KTU (LT) public lecture on volunteering for KTU gymnasium students (action 3). Research by Silke et al. (2024) suggests that exposure to acts of kindness or activism among social groups promotes empathy development in young students and schoolchildren.

The LPNU (UA) team highlighted the potential of university students as sources of innovative ideas in social communications and humanitarian aid. Findings from the case study championship emphasised the effectiveness of leveraging social communications to garner business support for humanitarian projects. Engaging students in social initiatives requires setting specific objectives and tasks tailored to the characteristics of the younger generation.

The UT (EE) Ukraine treasure hunt event (action 5) serves as a format that could be replicated in other partner countries or adapted to diverse target demographics. This social activity serves as an example of a supplementary or extracurricular endeavour for students, combining entertainment with educational value.

Hackathons organised by Web2Learn provided insights into the importance of leveraging effective online collaboration and communication tools to facilitate engagement among participants from diverse geographical locations. The positive feedback and high satisfaction rates highlight the intrinsic value of incorporating social objectives into hackathons to foster a sense of community and collective responsibility among emerging professionals. These insights are poised to guide future initiatives aiming for greater impact and engagement.

Some of the organisers also emphasised the benefits of collaborating with partners outside of HEIs (KTU (LT) event about volunteering, action 3; UT (EE) meeting with the Ukrainian Ambassador, action 8). Cooperation with external partners and involving them in social actions has laid a strong foundation for further collaboration in support of Ukraine and citizens affected by the war crisis.

7. Conclusions

The five collaborating universities, along with the business partner Web2Learn, organized and implemented a collective of 23 social actions catering to university students, academic and administrative personnel, as well as citizens from the Baltic states and Ukraine, encompassing a broader spectrum of society. The majority of these events transpired over a period of five months.

Although only 31% of participants provided their feedback in the post-action surveys, the general rating of their satisfaction was 9,1 (out of maximum 10), and 85% of participants found that the activity met their expectations. Seventy percent declared they have motivation and interest to participate in the future in social actions, and 84% thought the action helped to increase their motivation or interest

in engaging in university-driven initiatives for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. Three out of 23 social actions organised as part of the project applied the highest level of participation by empowering participants: students were encouraged to organise the events together with Ukrainian refugees, which functioned as a snow-ball effect to encourage them to take further action and contribute to the social life of the resident country. Film screenings and discussion sessions moved attendees emotionally and motivated participants to become closer and offer their helping hand to the Ukrainian people living in their communities. Study sessions, which were implemented together with specific partners from the community, offered informational tools to use when working for the best social interests.

While the Baltics4UA project achieved significant outcomes in fostering citizen engagement and addressing the humanitarian crisis, it also encountered limitations related to organizational challenges, safety concerns, language barriers, and stakeholder engagement. The safety concerns due to the war in Ukraine posed challenges in organizing events in Ukraine, requiring the selection of venues that could ensure participant safety. The language barriers and the need for translations was particularly challenging when dealing with materials or presentations in Ukrainian. These limitations underscore the complexity of implementing comprehensive citizen engagement initiatives and the need for flexible, adaptive approaches to overcome obstacles. The project's experience (challenges and lessons learnt) is also relevant for citizen science endeavours, as it is important to engage project participants in order to ensure progress in citizen science projects.

Summarising the experiences of planning and organising social actions, the project partners highlighted several important lessons. University students, as well as youth groups and high school students, represent a target audience with significant potential. Involving youth benefits both sides: organisers gain insights to effectively engage the younger generation, while young people have the opportunity to engage in meaningful social activities, foster empathy, and gain a desire to help people affected by the crisis of war. Additionally, the organisers noted that public organisations and social partners view social initiatives organised by universities in a positive light and are willing to collaborate, and events organised together attract a broader segment of society. It is equally important to consider certain organisational aspects when social actions are targeted at groups of different languages and cultures. It is worth considering the possibilities of implementing multilingual events, preparing at least several alternative feedback collection strategies, and flexibly planning events to adapt to participants' needs.

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