

For Immediate Release

NDI Report: Ukraine Holds Credible Local Elections Under New Decentralization Reforms

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Kyiv, Ukraine -- Despite significant internal and external challenges, Ukraine's October 25 nationwide local elections were generally well conducted and Ukrainians were able to freely participate in all aspects of the electoral process. Despite this success, NDI's analysis identified areas where the process could be improved, including the government's response to conducting elections during the covid-19 pandemic and avoiding last-minute changes to the election code.

"Ukrainians have reaffirmed their desire to live in a democratic system, and Ukraine has demonstrated, yet again, the capacity to carry out credible elections," said Ian T. Woodward, Resident Director, NDI Ukraine. "Ukrainian stakeholders, including parliament and election officials, made laudable efforts to improve the electoral environment. However, the unique challenges posed by this election impacted participation and demonstrated the need to ensure continued focus on the integrity and transparency of the election process."

NDI today released the report of its analysis of the election environment and procedures based on in-depth virtual interviews conducted from August 25 to October 23 with representatives of the Ukrainian government, political parties, electoral administration, civil society, media, and domestic and international observer organizations. The NDI report also benefited from ongoing interaction between the Institute's Kyiv office and a full range of electoral stakeholders based on relationships developed over 30 years of NDI programming in Ukraine.

Ukraine's local elections were the first conducted under Ukraine's decentralization reforms, which shifts significant power from the central authorities to the local level. During this process, thousands of villages and small towns combined to form new consolidated communities and opened new avenues for political participation at the local level. The election was also held under a new election code passed in December 2019, with final amendments made in September 2020.

According to the NDI report, these elections presented a test for both old and new parties in this new system, as the increased responsibilities afforded to local governments prompted more competitive races, in turn requiring more organized candidate recruitment processes and better coordination

between national and local party branches. In addition, the covid-19 required a coordinated government response to ensure the public's health and safety throughout the campaign period and on election day.

Key findings from NDI's analysis include:

- While NDI found that the legal framework was conducive to holding democratic elections, the late adoption of some changes, the complexity of the new system, and various technical gaps presented challenges to all election stakeholders. Changes continued throughout the electoral process and many proposals and decisions remained unresolved.
- The Central Election Commission (CEC) worked diligently to ensure preparedness for the elections amid the pandemic and evolving legal framework. Parties and civil society organizations characterized the Commission as open, transparent, and proactive. However, many acknowledged the difficult role the CEC faced balancing the need to clarify certain provisions of the election code while not overstepping its mandate.
- The decision to not conduct elections in 18 communities of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, representing almost 500,000 voters, was a feature of political discussions throughout the election process. While these communities are expected to elect their local councils once the security conditions are met, rayon-level councils were elected without their participation, cementing their lack of representation until the next local elections.
- Despite the limitations on gatherings and in-person party activities, the campaign was vibrant, with parties quickly adapting their campaigns to online platforms. While campaigning was dynamic, there was a noticeable lack of substance to party and candidate platforms. The parties' electoral programs tended to be general and to give scant attention to issues of local concern, limiting the ability of voters to make informed decisions.
- The new electoral framework provides unprecedented opportunities for enfranchisement and participation of women, including through an enforceable gender quota for party lists. However, there is still a room for improvement in ensuring that the balance between men and women on party lists is maintained in the event of candidate replacement or withdrawal before or after the election.
- Disinformation remained a threat to the integrity of the information environment, with the most serious and sustained threat in the form of pro-Russian disinformation narratives. These narratives seek to undermine the legitimacy of the Ukrainian state and its government; weaken ties between Ukraine and its partners in the West; and promote the image of the Russian government. Rather than targeting particular mayoral races or engaging with local issues, disinformation campaigns tended to repeat narratives that, if believed, could have led to a warped perception of politics in Ukraine that could have directly affected how voters perceived their choices at the ballot box.

The report outlines practical recommendations to address these issues, build trust, and improve specific areas of the election process, including the legal framework, formation and training of election commissions, the media, the use of administrative resources, women's participation and campaign financing.

NDI will continue to closely monitor the results of the election, including a second round that will be held in the weeks ahead for many mayoral races across the country.

NDI wishes to express its appreciation to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which has supported this issue of Ukraine Election Watch, as well as the Institute's other ongoing election analysis efforts through CEPPS.

NDI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. NDI has organized more than 250 international observation missions or assessments to more than 65 countries, including numerous assessments in Ukraine since 1992. For more information about NDI and its programs, please visit www.ndi.org.