

**For Immediate Release**

## **NDI Report: Efforts Needed to Ensure Preparedness, Enfranchisement and Public Health**

*September 29, 2020*

**Washington, DC** -- Ukraine approaches local balloting on October 25, 2020 with a strong track record in recent years of democratic elections, yet facing challenging conditions, according to analysis released today by the National Democratic Institute. *Ukraine Election Watch* notes headwinds facing the country, including an unfamiliar and complex new election system, disruptions stemming from an ongoing conflict with Russia and the public health risks associated with the coronavirus pandemic.

“These issues will test the resilience of Ukraine’s electoral foundations,” said former Member of the European Parliament Rebecca Harms. “Concerted efforts to ensure voter and poll worker preparedness, maximize enfranchisement, and mitigate health risks will be needed.”

The analysis released today of the pre-election environment is based on in-depth interviews conducted virtually from September 14 - 18, 2020, by an NDI team that included Harms, NDI Regional Director for Programs in Eurasia Laura Jewett, NDI Ukraine Deputy Director Natia Jikia, NDI Program Director for Elections Mario Mitre, and NDI Ukraine Country Director Ian T. Woodward.

The NDI report addresses issues related to the electoral framework and administration, the campaign environment, gender and inclusion, the information environment and the impact of the covid-19 pandemic. The team spoke with representatives of the Ukrainian government, political parties, the electoral administration, civil society, the media and domestic and international observer organizations. The report also benefited from ongoing interaction between the Institute’s Kyiv office and the full range of electoral stakeholders; and the Institute’s expertise and relationships developed over almost 30 years of programming in Ukraine and conducting international election observation around the globe.

These will be the first nationwide local polls following reforms that enhance the powers of local elected officials, making the results more consequential for voters.

The report highlights numerous improvements since the last nationwide elections in 2019. Chief among these is a new election code that harmonizes the legal framework for elections at all levels, introduces an open-list proportional system for legislatures, and seeks to increase the participation of women, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and persons with disabilities, among other changes. In

addition, trust in the Central Election Commission (CEC) rose over the course of the 2019 elections and remains healthy among the public, civil society organizations, and political parties.

Despite these assets, the report notes hurdles. The new election system, still being amended, is expected to be confusing to poll workers, observers and voters, potentially resulting in invalid ballots or uncertainties in the vote count. The covid-19 pandemic restricts parties' and candidates' abilities to campaign and places significant burdens on election administrators to balance citizens' constitutional right to vote with health precautions. A decision not to conduct elections in 18 communities in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, with the stated reason of protecting citizens in areas at high risk of conflict in the war with Russia, will disenfranchise almost half a million voters.

“These elections will serve as a barometer of the country’s democratic progress,” said Harms. “A credible process that reflects the will of voters would add needed momentum to Ukraine’s democratic trajectory.”

The report makes 27 recommendations to improve Ukraine’s electoral process. They include the following:

- The CEC, political parties, civil society organizations and public and private media should conduct robust and wide-reaching voter education campaigns to familiarize citizens with the new electoral system and covid-related protocols.
- The CEC should receive the fullest possible support in providing extensive training to territorial- and precinct-level election commissions on their responsibilities.
- The Verkhovna Rada (parliament) should expeditiously adopt draft legislation intended to keep electoral actors safe during the pandemic and the Cabinet of Ministers should allocate sufficient funds to local authorities and election administration bodies for the implementation of the covid-19 mitigation plan.
- Authorities should make concerted efforts to explain to electoral stakeholders and the general public their rationale for determining that elections should not be conducted in 18 communities of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, including their criteria and logic, to build trust and understanding. Once criteria are established, publicized and met, the CEC should conduct elections in these communities as soon as possible to prevent the prolonged disenfranchisement of their almost half million voters.
- Political parties and candidates should develop targeted strategies for reaching voters, including those in more restrictive zones and who lack access to social media, and should develop and share policy platforms that respond to concerns that can be addressed at the local level.
- Parties should emphasize recruiting, training and nominating women candidates to winnable positions on lists and further develop party infrastructures to support women and marginalized groups, and integrate issues of specific concern to these communities into party platforms.

- Civil society organizations, the donor community and government should collaborate to substantially increase funding and programming around monitoring and countering disinformation, on the one hand, and investing in long-term media literacy and education about disinformation on the other.

NDI has assigned experts to conduct long-term, in-depth analysis of the key themes highlighted in this report and will continue to monitor the overall election process through its conclusion. NDI will issue a comprehensive assessment of the overall electoral process shortly after the elections.

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*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](http://www.ndi.org).*