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Local Elections Results in Ukraine

Local elections in Ukraine were held on October 25, 2020. They were conducted for the first time in accordance with the new electoral law in conditions of the ongoing decentralization of the country. Over 28 million citizens were eligible to take part in the elections for city mayors, heads of villages and townships, as well as deputies to the local councils. However, only 10.6 million voters came to polling stations. The low voter turnout was a result of the disillusionment of society with the activities of the Servant of the People party and some politicians on the national political stage. The main winners of the local government elections are the regional political elites and their purpose-built political parties.

General outline. The intensity of the pre-election fight clearly indicated that voting in the local elections on October 25, 2020, would be of unprecedented importance for the future of Ukraine. These were the first local government elections conducted under the new electoral legislation in the conditions of ongoing decentralization of the state. In towns with over ten thousand voters, only registered political parties had the legal right to propose candidates for positions of councils' deputies of various levels. This legal norm mobilized regional elites to establish their own political groups, including the Proposition party founded by the mayors of six major cities and many others. Such activity was also caused by the fact that long before the elections, the regional elites felt the central government's weakness and their willingness to shift the problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic or responsibility for the economy's failures to local authorities. As soon as the first information about the emergence of regional parties became available, it became clear that they were preparing for fierce competition with the pro-presidential party, Servant of the People.

The turnout in local government elections stood at 36.88%, i.e., it was 10% lower than in the 2015 local elections. The most active voting was recorded in the Ternopil region (44.68%) and the lowest was registered in the Donetsk region (31.67%). The main reason for this relatively low turnout was society's disappointment with the ruling Servant of the People party and the politicians at the state level. At the same time, some voters did not come to the polling stations because of the threats related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The observers concluded that the elections had passed smoothly and without significant violations or major problems. The most serious violations were recorded in the capital, as well as in Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Odessa regions. They were mainly related to the organization of polling stations, political propaganda, which is prohibited on the day of elections, non-compliance with anti-pandemic measures, attempts to bribe voters, organization of transport to the polling stations, and errors in election bulletins. In general, the National Police registered 4,375 reports about the violation of the electoral law during the voting day, and 77 criminal proceedings were opened.

Elections of mayors. Due to the specificity of the new electoral system (the introduction of open party lists) and the complex process of vote count (the majority of voters received four ballots), the Central Election Commission of Ukraine began publishing the official election results only on October 30, 2020. However, they have not been released entirely at the time of writing. Territorial election commissions had to establish the election results by November 6, but not all of them submitted the information to the CEC. Nevertheless, even the data from the exit polls showed that the main winners in the local elections were local political elites. The current mayors of the regional centers (apart from Rivne, whose mayor did not run for re-election, and Chernivtsi), who were elected back in 2015, will most likely retain their offices. Meanwhile, the candidates from the Servant of the People party established less than three years ago, did not make it to the second round. Among them are Iryna Vereshchuk

and Oleh Filimonov, who took third place in Kyiv and Odessa, respectively. One of the few exceptions is Uzhhorod, where a candidate from the pro-presidential party Viktor Shchadey has a chance to win in the second-round run-off battle. In some regional centers, mayors were elected in the first round of voting, in particular in Kyiv (Vitaliy Klitschko), Kharkiv (Gennadiy Kernes), Zhytomyr (Serhiy Sukhomlyn), Kropyvnytskyi (Andriy Raykovych), Vinnytsia (Serhiy Morhunov), Ivano-Frankivsk (Ruslan Martsinkiv), Zaporizhzhia (Volodymyr Buriak), Ternopil (Serhiy Nadal) and Khmelnytskyi (Oleksandr Symchyshyn), as well as in Mariupol (Vadym Boychenko). The second round of elections is scheduled for November 15 or 22, while in Chernivtsi for November 29.

Elections to local councils. Local parties became winners in many local government councils. As a rule, the political orientation of these parties corresponds to the mentality of the population of those regions where they were established: pro-Russian ones prevail in eastern Ukraine, and nationalist ones in the west of the country. Overall, regional parties won the elections in 11 regional city councils. The parliamentary parties took first place in other councils of regional centers: European Solidarity has won in the councils of three regional centers (Kyiv, Lviv, Rivne), For the Future in three regional centers (Lutsk, Poltava, Cherkasy – the parties For the Future and Servant of the People will have the same number of deputies in the council of this city), the All-Ukrainian Union “Svoboda” in two (Ivano-Frankivsk, Ternopil), Batkivshchyna in two (Uzhhorod, Sumy), and the Opposition Platform – For Life in one (Mykolaiv). Servant of the People came second out of five parties even in the city council’s voting in Kryvyi Rih, President Volodymyr Zelensky’s hometown.

The local elections showed that the Servant of the People party, which had been dominant before, had lost its popularity. In many regions, it took third or even fourth place in the local council elections. On the other hand, the European Solidarity and the Opposition Platform – For Life, which based their election campaigns on the analysis of the errors of the current authorities, strengthened their positions. For example, the European Solidarity won the greatest support, 20.52% of the popular vote, in Kyiv City Council, while Vitaliy Klitschko’s UDAR received 19.98%, Unity of Oleksandr Omelchenko received 8.74%, Opposition Platform – For Life received 7.81%, Servant of the People received 7.53%, Batkivshchyna received 7.49%, and Holos received 5.97%.

The election results showed that the Holos party exceeded the expectations. It was supported by only 1.4% of the voters just before the election day (according to the survey of the Sociological Group “Rating”). It got a clearly better result in the elections to city councils, especially in the councils of Kyiv, Rivne, Lviv, and Cherkasy (at the level of 5.97-11.04%). Batkivshchyna did not achieve spectacular victories; in many regions of Central Ukraine, it barely achieved or failed to reach the 5% threshold. “Svoboda” in its turn actually lost its influence in Central Ukraine and turned into a regional party in the western part of the country. On the other hand, the Shariy’s Party, established by the popular blogger Anatoliy Shariy over a year ago, immediately managed to make it into the councils of several large cities, inter alia Kharkiv, Odessa, Mykolaiv, and Mariupol.

Five questions from the President. There was also a nationwide poll initiated by President Volodymyr Zelensky on the day of the local elections. On the one hand, it had to mobilize the voters of the Servant of the People party to vote in the elections, and on the other, with its help, the authorities aimed to establish main issues requiring urgent solutions. According to the Office of the President of Ukraine, this polling conducted at the exit from polling stations will have no direct legal consequences. The respondents had to answer five questions concerning 1) the support of the idea of life imprisonment for corruption on a particularly large scale; 2) creation of a free economic zone in Luhansk and Donetsk regions; 3) the reduction of the number of Verkhovna Rada deputies’ from 450 to 300; 4) legalization of cannabis for medical purposes to reduce pain in critically ill patients; 5) the need to raise the issue of security guarantees set out in the Budapest Memorandum at the international level¹.

¹ The Budapest Memorandum was signed on December 5, 1994, at the summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Under this document, the Russian Federation, the United States, and the United Kingdom committed to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.

According to the Sociological Group "Rating", the most active group taking part in the poll was the voters of the Servant of the People party (63%). The least active were the voters of the European Solidarity (27%). It is noteworthy that this polling raised many questions in the community of sociologists and observers, especially due to the chaotic organization of the enterprise itself, the participation of minors, cases of multiple submissions of the questionnaires, and attempts to conduct the survey at the polling stations. Accordingly, the sociologists advise being careful with the poll's results and its interpretation.

Conclusions. The local elections of October 25, 2020, clearly confirmed the tendency towards the regionalization of Ukraine. The local elites were the main winners and although in some cities the victors in the mayoral races will be selected only in the second-round run-offs, there is a high probability that the incumbent mayors of the large cities will remain in their positions. At the same time, regional parties were not successful in getting the majority of seats in local councils; as a result, they will have to enter into coalitions with one of the national parties.

Servant of the People party lost its popularity significantly, which had a direct impact on the voter turnout. It was much lower than in both presidential (first round – 62.8%, second round – 61.37%) and parliamentary elections (49.84%) in 2019. Although the party in power tries to perceive the local elections as a victory, as it had not previously had its representatives in the local councils, it is undoubtedly a failure for the political image of the Servant of the People party. President Volodymyr Zelensky is aware that the results achieved in the current elections are an indicator of the possible future elections to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, it may turn out that the Servant of the People will be only the second or even third party in the country, after the European Solidarity and the Opposition Platform – For Life. In this situation, it is unlikely that President Zelensky will dissolve the current Verkhovna Rada and will decide to hold early parliamentary elections.