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## **The Importance of Local Elections in the Political Life of Ukraine**

**Local elections in Ukraine will be held on October 25, 2020. The growth in the number of candidates for local government bodies, the transfer of politicians from the central to the local level, the strengthening of the local elites and their self-organization into political parties to fight for power, the involvement of professional political strategists in the election process, issuing significant funds for election campaigns, and intense political struggle are the indirect indicators of the growing importance of the upcoming elections. Because of decentralization, the local self-government bodies have increased their political role, the scope of power and the scale of resources at their disposal. As a result, this election campaign may be the most expensive and competitive one in the history of Ukraine.**

**Elections to local councils.** According to the data of the Central Election Commission of Ukraine, 194 parties announced their participation in the local elections on October 25, 2020. That means slightly more than half of those registered in the country. For comparison, 132 parties took part in the 2015 local elections. The increase in the number of parties is due to the fact that the elections in all territorial communities with more than 10,000 voters are held only in accordance with the proportional system with open party lists.

A total of 141 parties nominated candidates on the party lists. Half of them come from the six largest parties: Servant of the People – 21.4 thousand (10.13% of the total number of candidates on party lists), Batkivshchyna – 21.4 thousand (10.14%), European Solidarity – 19.8 thousand (9.4%), For the Future – 20.1 thousand (9.52%), Opposition Platform – For Life (OPFL) – 15.9 thousand (7.51%), and Our Land – 11.5 thousand (5.45%). These political forces put forward their candidates in almost all regions of the country. From 3.9 to 9.5 thousand registered candidates belong to the following parties: All-Ukrainian Union “Svoboda”, Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko, Strength and Honour, Proposition, Holos, and UDAR. They take part in the elections in most regions of the country.

The participation of a significant number of the so-called regional political parties is a specific feature of the upcoming elections. These are political forces whose activities are limited to one specific region, district or city. Among the parties that announced their participation in elections are: Kernes Bloc – Successful Kharkiv!, All-Ukrainian Union “Cherkashchany”, Khersoncy, Mykolaiivtsi, Dnipro Team, Berezan Community, Bila Tserkva Together, Native Zakarpattia, Party of Vinnitsa Citizens, Party of Chernivtsi Citizens, and others.

According to the Sociological Group “Rating” survey published on October 7, 2020, 22.2% of Ukrainians are ready to support local political forces in elections to the regional councils. Among those who have certain political preferences and intend to take part in the elections, 17.2% are ready to support the Servant of the People party, 12.6% support the OPFL, 11.7% support the European Solidarity, while Batkivshchyna and For the Future are supported by 7.5% and 7.2% of the potential voters respectively. All of these parties, with the exception of Batkivshchyna, improved their ratings over the past week. The possible results for other political forces could be as follows: Our Land party 4%, Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko 3.9%, Vitaliy Klitschko’s UDAR 3%, Shariy’s Party 2.6%, “Svoboda” 2.4%. At the same time, Holos, Palchevskiy’s Victory, and Strength and Honour parties could get 1.6% of the vote each, while the Proposition could capture just 0.9%. Among this group of parties, only the Our Land and the Shariy’s Party improved their ratings throughout last week. All these parties can be conventionally divided into several groups: right-wing and nationalist (European Solidarity, “Svoboda”, Holos, Strength and Honour, supported by 17.5% of respondents), centrist (Servant of the People, Batkivshchyna, For the Future,

Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko, UDAR, Palchevskiy's Victory, Proposition, 41.4%) and those representing a pro-Russian orientation (OPFL, Our Land, Shariy's Party, 19.2%).

**Elections of mayors.** Two thousand eight hundred eighty five candidates applied for 370 mayoral positions in the local elections, which means that on average seven candidates will compete for one seat. The greatest number of them wishes to become the mayors of Odessa (23 candidates), Uzhhorod (22), and Kyiv (20). The lowest number of candidates are interested in becoming the mayors of Ternopil (9), Chernihiv (7), and Ivano-Frankivsk (5). Overall, the largest number of candidates for the chairmen of city councils was recorded in the Luhansk region (22 candidates on average) and Kyiv (20). A significant number of candidates for these positions were also registered in Zhytomyr (10 on average), Cherkasy, and Dnipropetrovsk (9 each) regions. In Chernihiv (5) and Khmelnytskyi (4) regions, one could observe the lowest competition level.

The situation with the elections of mayors of the regional centres is of particular interest. Only the Servant of the People party registered its candidates in all 22 regional centres where the elections will be held. Meanwhile, the European Solidarity (in 17), Batkivshchyna (in 16), OPFL (in 15), For the Future (in 15), "Svoboda" (in 12), and Our Land (in 11) nominated their candidates in half or more than half regional centres. Four parties proposed candidates for mayors in less than half of regional centres, namely Holos (in 10), Proposition (in 10), Palchevskiy's Victory, and Strength and Honour (in 8 each). All other political forces compete for the mayoral seat in a single or just a few regional centres. Despite the support of President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has made many working visits to almost all parts of the country, polls show that Servant of the People representatives will not be able to win the race for mayors in regional centres.

**Parliamentarians and the local elections.** In total 45 people's deputies will take part in the upcoming local elections. Five of them are the candidates for the positions of deputies of the Volyn Regional Council from the For the Future party: Vyacheslav Rublev (although he is a member of the Servant of the People faction in the parliament), Ihor Huz, Iryna Konstankevych, Ihor Palytsia and Stepan Ivakhiv. Five MPs will fight for the seats in the local government of Lviv region: Oleh Synyutka (European Solidarity) and Yaroslav Rushchyshyn (Holos) run for the mayor of Lviv position, while Mikhail Tsymbalyuk (Batkivshchyna), Taras Batenko and Yaroslav Dubnevych (For the Future) run for the seats of the regional council deputies.

Three deputies of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine became candidates for the office of mayor of Kyiv: Iryna Vereshchuk (Servant of the People), Oleksiy Kucherenko (Batkivshchyna) and Serhiy Shakhov (Our Land). Oleksandr Dubinsky, a deputy who is the head of the so-called "Kolomoysky Group", leads the pro-presidential party to the Kyiv City Council. Serhiy Koleboshyn is a candidate for the Odessa City Council from the list of Servant of the People. Vadym Rabinovych and Oleksiy Honcharenko run for the same positions from the OPFL and European Solidarity respectively. Mykola Skoryk (OPFL) is a candidate for the mayor of Odessa, while Oleksiy Kucher, from the Servant of the People party list, and Oleksandr Feldman, from OPFL, run for the chairman of Kharkiv City Council seat.

The most controversial representatives from the past governments also have a chance to join the institutions of power at the local level. One of them is the former director of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, Volodymyr Viatrovych, who heads the European Solidarity party list to the Ivano-Frankivsk Regional Council.

The fact that the Verkhovna Rada deputies run as candidates in elections to local councils and the offices of mayor proves that some political forces do not have regional leaders. Local party units have no one to lean on in the regions. Therefore, the MPs act as a kind of election engine, contributing to an increase in the rating of the political forces they represent. However, even if they receive the local mandate, most likely none of them will give up their posts as a people's deputies and no one will start working in the local councils. Such actions should rather be treated as a political technology.

**Conclusions.** The importance of the local elections in Ukraine has sharply increased due to the emergence of new socio-political factors. The first of them is the ongoing decentralization of public authorities and the transfer of power, including the financial one, to local levels. As a consequence, the development of the country and the well-being of its citizens will now be more dependent on the quality of the local self-government.

Secondly, after the opening of the agricultural land market in 2021, when local authorities will deal with the issue of land sales, there may be a tendency among the officials to engage in corruption activities. Thirdly, because of the worsening economic and social environment in Ukraine, the unstable political situation, and the decrease in the ratings of the president and the central authorities, the threat of the country's decomposition remains. In these conditions, regional councils may decide to secede from the Ukrainian state. Therefore, the political orientation of the local authorities in the present conditions will be of decisive importance for preserving the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

The 2020 local elections differ from the previous ones by the participation of a large number of regional political parties, which together can obtain around 22% of the vote. Thus, the rivalry between All-Ukrainian parties is complemented by the confrontation between them and the regional parties. The political orientation of the latter corresponds to the mentality of the population: the pro-Russian parties dominate in eastern Ukraine, and the nationalist ones lead in the west of the country. Regional political forces will most likely not be able to get a majority of seats in the local councils. Consequently, they will have to enter into coalitions with national parties, which in turn will set the ideological direction of the work of these bodies. At the same time, the strengthened local political forces will deepen the regionalization of Ukraine, and in unfavourable conditions may even become a source of separatism.

The polls show that the pro-presidential Servant of the People party will lose a significant number of supporters in October 25, 2020 local elections. Nevertheless, it will retain the leadership with 17.2% of the vote due to the administrative resources. The OPFL comes second with a steady support of 12.6% and in the third is Petro Poroshenko's European Solidarity with 11.7%. The ratings of these parties rose due to the decline in the popularity of the Servant of the People. As a result, local authorities will be less loyal to the central government than before. However, we do not observe a significant radicalization of public opinion. In total, centrist parties can win over 50% of the vote including local centrist parties.