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## Ukraine's Local Elections 2015: the regionalisation of politics

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On 25 October Ukrainians elected their local, rayon (subregional) and oblast (regional) council deputies and mayors. These were the first country-wide local elections held since the Euromaidan revolution of 2013-2014, and there was an expectation that they would help bring about a democratic renewal of political elites at the local and regional level. Importantly, as a result of the ongoing decentralisation reform, the newly elected council members and mayors will have more resources and executive powers.

The elections have been competitive, with over 130 parties running. The electoral turnout was 46.6 per cent, which is lower than the 52 per cent turnout in the 2010 local elections. Although electoral standards have improved since the 2010 elections held under ex-president Viktor Yanukovich, unlawful practices, including vote buying and the use of the 'administrative resource' (incumbents use of public resources to harvest votes) have been reported. Many irregularities are also related to the implementation of a new electoral law: many of its provisions are vague and the electoral commissions have not been sufficiently trained to navigate the new legislative measures. Still, according to Ukrainian NGO watchdogs and international observers, overall the elections respected the democratic process.

The local elections did not take place in Crimea (occupied by Russia), the separatist-controlled territories of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions and areas in close proximity to the frontline. On election day, the vote was cancelled or ruled invalid by the local electoral commissions in three Kyiv-controlled municipalities of the Lugansk and Donetsk regions, including in Mariupol, a city with half a million residents near the frontline with separatist forces. In Mariupol, local civil society accused the Opposition Bloc and oligarch Rinat Akhmetov of attempting electoral fraud by printing duplicates of the ballot papers. Local civil society also held the Kyiv government and the Central Electoral Commission responsible for failing to guarantee fair and transparent elections in Mariupol.

Judging from exit-poll data, it seems that the elections are likely to bring important changes to Ukraine's politics. In the 2010 local elections, the Party of Regions (PoR) led by former president Yanukovych secured absolute majorities in the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine and the pro-European opposition won mainly in the western regions. In 2015, the East-West divide of Ukraine into Russia-oriented and Europe-oriented regions has been blurred (although not entirely disappeared) – a trend already visible in the results of the 2014 parliamentary elections. The results point to greater regional diversity: there are not only two or three Ukraines, but many.

Former PoR members still won in the southern and eastern regions, running under new party denominations, such as the Opposition Bloc, the Revival Party and the Our Country party. But unlike in 2010, they have competed against each other and have not obtained absolute majorities, except in a few cases.

The parliamentary coalition parties that took part in the elections – President Petro Poroshenko's bloc 'Solidarity', Yulia Tymoshenko's 'Motherland' and 'Self-Reliance' led by Lviv mayor Andriy Sadovyi – won in the west and centre of the country. However, they faced tough competition from parties that are not currently in parliament. For example, the nationalist Svoboda, which lost the 2014 parliamentary elections, has secured representation in the west and centre of the country, including Kyiv. Candidates from the newly established Ukrainian Association of Patriots (Ukrop), sponsored by oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi, were elected in various regions of Ukraine, including in his home city Dnipropetrovsk. Local or regional parties led by popular mayors won in a number of Ukrainian cities (Kharkiv, Odesa, Chernihiv, Vinnytsia, Cherkasy to name a few).

These elections have exposed a disconnect between national and local politics, with the latter no longer simply reflecting the predominant political divide between government and opposition in parliament. In some regions and cities, the parties from the ruling parliamentary coalition may find themselves on opposite sides (for example, in Kyiv). In other regions, small parties led by

popular mayors become pivots of local politics (for example, in Kharkiv or Odesa). Thus, Ukraine's local politics will likely be increasingly embedded in the local and regional contexts rather than mirroring the national political landscape.

The majority of local and regional councils will require coalition governments. This is an important change, especially in the east and the south of the country, where the PoR has dominated local politics for over a decade. The new, more pluralistic political landscape there may also offer an opportunity for improving the quality of regional governance.

The regionalisation of politics is also evidence of the weakening power of the central government. Some of the winners of the 2014 parliamentary elections are among the losers of the 2015 local elections. The National Front led by Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk, which won 22 per cent of the votes in October 2014, did not participate in the local elections as polls indicated that its support had dropped to one per cent. Candidates and party lists from the Poroshenko Bloc came first in many regions of Ukraine, but did not repeat the electoral success of 2014. Given the population's disappointment with their rulers, as the reform process stalls and corruption continues to flourish, such an electoral upset was predictable.

In contrast, Ukrainian oligarchs secured their grip on power over local politics in various parts of the country. Rinat Akhmetov, who controls major enterprises and media outlets in the east, preserves his influence in this part of the country through the Opposition Bloc and loyal mayors. Relying upon vast campaign resources and a TV channel, Ihor Kolomoyskyi succeeded in garnering support for Ukrop far beyond his home city of Dnipropetrovsk. He is also believed to support the Revival Party, which won in Kharkiv.

On balance, the local elections bring about a more diverse and fragmented political landscape while confirming the influence of oligarchs on local politics. The regionalisation of Ukrainian politics also implies that there will be strong bottom-up support for the continuation of decentralisation reforms, as the newly elected power-holders will strive for greater autonomy from the centre.