

VOTE OUT OF THE BOX

Global changes in international relations create the preconditions for the transformation of modern democracies, both globally and regionally. Given that a separate the Council of Europe project “Supporting the transparency, inclusiveness and integrity of electoral practices in Ukraine” is being implemented in Ukraine, we will consider the issue of ensuring democracy through electoral practices for our country. However, firstly I propose to review trends in promoting democracy in the world and in Ukraine.

If we look at “The Economist” data on the level of democracy in the world, it can be seen that the Democracy Index has not worsened in 2018, but has not shown any significant growth after several years of decline. At the same time, one of the key indicators of the level of democracy - political participation - increased last year. This fact allows one to hope for the transition of states from the lower types of democratic regimes to the regime of full democracy.

According to the Democracy Index, Ukraine ranks 84th among 165 independent states and two territories and belongs to the “hybrid regime”. By the category of "political participation" our country is one of the leaders among the countries of this type. But if we pay attention to another category that is fundamental to the stability and security of democracy, called "electoral process and pluralism", the situation is actually sad. Even Bolivia and Honduras, which are our ranking neighbours, have significantly higher rates*.

This fact, combined with other factors, put the issue of the electoral process and electoral practices as one of the key issues to ensuring democracy in Ukraine.

The driving force of democracy in our country must be youth. It is the young people who have endorsed the European civilization choice of Ukrainians.

*http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Democracy_Index_2018.pdf&mode=wp&campaignid=Democracy2018

The importance of youth participation in the political life of the country is also due to the fact that the percentage of youth votes in Ukraine is 1/3 of all electoral votes. Unfortunately, the least willingness to participate in the elections in Ukraine is observed among young people. This is borne out by the fact that during a number of recent elections, less than half of eligible youth participated in the vote. I believe that the reason for such inertia is the widespread belief that young people do not decide anything and have no influence on state processes and public life, as well as the opacity of the electoral processes in Ukraine.

So, we should solve the problem and the need to activate the political participation of young people, in particular in the electoral process.

From my perspective, the desired result can be achieved by forming in the vast majority of young people the political consciousness, and as the majority consists of a number of minorities, so the formation process must include an element of inclusiveness. Another important factor in activating of youth participation in electoral processes is the creation of appropriate institutional conditions.

Now let us focus more on the mechanisms of youth involvement in public life.

I am convinced that the civic position begins to form at the school stage, when the young person begins to analyze independently the processes in society and give them some assessment. Obviously, the level of such analysis is embryonic and often leads to misconceptions.

That is why it is extremely important to introduce education for democratic citizenship and human rights education at school, in order to make pupils aware of the possibilities of defending their rights and responsibilities, spreading a democratic culture among them, and forming balanced ideas about their role in the community. Such education should lay the groundwork for young people to influence on political and social life.

To ensure the effectiveness of such education, it is necessary to include a practical component. Only the consideration of the real cases will contribute in the

future to fruitful and democratic interaction of young people and other subjects of public relations.

The next life stage for a young person is studying at a higher education institution. A positive fact is that the Ukrainian universities have an extremely extensive system of student and public self-government bodies. Most positions in these bodies are elective. This already enables the student to exercise his/her suffrage when voting for candidates. Such participation is local, but allows youth to feel their influence on the activities of the university by delegating the right to represent their interests to elected representatives.

On the other hand, students may be candidates for positions in student and public self-government bodies. This allows young people to understand the principles of election campaigns, voter involvement, providing the transparency and fairness of elections.

Therefore, the active involvement of young people in the electoral process at universities contributes to the development of advocacy skills for group interests and the formation of civic stand.

Currently, decentralization processes are underway in Ukraine. And this is a very important and positive factor in enhancing the role of young people in public life. Decentralization is a tool for implementing youth ideas and implementing youth policies in the regions. An effective form of youth organization should be Youth Councils, which will serve as an advisory body to city councils. Such Youth Councils will develop the priorities of the youth policy of the regions and will monitor the implementation of the policy, ensure the participation of young people in the distribution of the public budget. Local youth centers, camps and clubs should also be established on the ground, which will carry out ongoing youth work, create educational spaces to promote youth policy, and thus democracies, and take measures to involve young people in public initiatives.

Such approaches are only possible with the active support of local self-government bodies, their interaction with central authorities and with clear coordination by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

At the same time, it is necessary to determine the principles of youth participation in society at the state level. The first step is the adoption of the Law of Ukraine "On Youth", which will provide institutional support to youth associations. This will coordinate efforts and encourage cooperation between public authorities, local self-government bodies, youth NGOs, and civil society institutions.

If young people are involved in state-building processes, this will make these processes more transparent and harmonized in accordance with international standards, since the main demand for openness, honesty and transparency is coming from young people.

I strongly believe that such steps will create an avalanche effect so that young people will become more involved in public life, have an active public position and ensure democracy in Ukraine.

When considering the issue of political participation and participation in elections, it is worth remembering the representatives of minorities and vulnerable groups of people.

In particular, during the election campaign, responsible state and local institutions should work with representatives of national minorities, organize trainings and outreach projects for voters in the languages of these national minorities. The election documentation must also be tailored to the needs of the representatives of national minorities, translated into their language. Permanent contact with representatives of minorities gives them an equal access to elections and also ensures full voting, leading to the establishment of a just democracy.

In addition, the state should ensure equal access to the electoral process for people with disabilities. The information should be provided in all necessary

alternative forms. Steps must be taken to overcome certain difficulties, including language barriers, poverty, obstacles to freedom of movement. The bodies providing the electoral process should give voters with special needs the right and opportunity to vote on an equal footing with others, that is, secretly and personally. Voting procedures, voting venues and their location, as well as materials, should be appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use. This may involve the use of additional or new technologies, such as Braille alphabet or electronic voting.

In Ukraine, internally displaced persons can also be attributed to vulnerable groups. In this case, the state should introduce a simplified procedure for changing the place of voting. It should be transparent and accessible. However, this is not enough. Executives should have an active voter awareness and clarification campaign. In this way, the awareness of internally displaced persons can be raised and their participation in the electoral process can be increased.

Based on the above, I would like to focus on the role of social media as subjects of direct influence on the electoral process.

Unfortunately, the media in Ukraine are mainly agitation platforms for promoting political forces close to media owners. An additional indicator of the inconsistency of Ukrainian media with international standards is a gender imbalance, which distorts the perception of the subjects of the election process with a focus on men.

In order to effectively address this problem, it is necessary to give the media regulator the opportunity to prosecute violators of electoral law. Such a regulator in Ukraine is the National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting. However, the regulator has virtually no legal influence over unfair media. In this regard, it is necessary to align the legislation with the needs and standards of transparent, fair and objective broadcasting.

The local councils should form an additional control lever that will monitor the activities of the local media.

An important tool for overcoming the political involvement of social media is the state funding of political parties and election campaigns, along with increasing the level of control over party finances. This tool can cause public resistance, as parties will thus be financed from tax revenue from citizens. Nonetheless, public funding will separate political parties and candidates from outside influence. This process will promote independent and honest social media activity.

But, in my opinion, self-regulation is the best mechanism for protecting the media from its owners and the state. A fundamental step in the creation of an effective mechanism of self-regulation is a jointly-developed code of ethics that reflects legislation, journalistic traditions, the structure of media ownership, and social and cultural norms in unity and integrity.

It is also important for the audience to be aware of the existence of such a code and the obligation of journalists to abide by it. It is the sense of responsibility of journalists to the public that makes the self-regulation mechanism effective.

One of the subjects of the self-regulation mechanism should be the press-ombudsman. This is the person who represents the interests of the audience within the media itself. The person in this role is the mediator between the audience and the journalists and media owners. Its tasks should include overseeing compliance with the code of ethics, responding to audience complaints, and initiating internal discussions based on them.

In order to normalize the activities of the media in Ukraine and to bring it in line with democratic standards, it is also necessary to adopt a Law “On audiovisual services”, which is a commitment of Ukraine to the European Union and the Council of Europe.

To sum up, I would like to emphasize that participation in public life, shaping public policy and introducing democracy is becoming increasingly popular among Ukrainian youth. Change agents are active in all areas of civic relations to promote

youth policy and to make the majority of young people conscious and responsible citizens.

Finally, I would like to express my conviction that in the medium term Ukraine, with the support of the younger generation, will become an example of embodying democracy and Ukraine will even “export” it to other countries of the world.

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