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Local governance and social cohesion in Ukraine

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OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the reasons behind the lack of the development of local governance in Ukraine and to explore different visions of its reforms. Furthermore, we wanted to collect a mosaic of opinions on the levels of participation in local government and its role on major public services; such as education, health care, social services and the support for SMEs. And finally, we inquired about the levels of trust and the importance of networks in the everyday life of Ukrainian population.

MAIN RESULTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Local governance and social cohesion are important political principles which feature prominently in Ukrainian politics but there are many obstacles to their effective implementation. Despite many discussions about the need for the reform of local government, both in political institutions as well as in civil society, there is no political will to draft a plan and an action plan with a view to implement it. The legislation on local government and administrative-territorial reform which was drafted in 2009 and, to this day, has not been discussed in the Parliament since the Central Government claims that the local government is functioning. The same Government pays lip service to the legislation on local government proposed by the Council of Europe. Serhiy Malikov, during the course of the Ukrainian Delegation's report to representatives of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe on the reform of local government, stated that 'We clearly and consistently adhere to the policy of attracting the European local government experience, realizing that in the course of reform, the Ukrainian model of local government will be one of the most advanced in Europe.' This autumn the Parliament will propose its own action plan, as Malikov informed the Council of Europe, just two months before the 3rd Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. The majority of my respondents stated that they were not hoping for any major decision to be made since the Government will continue to use the same strategy with Europe, paying lip service and postponing discussion on the proposed action plan in the Parliament by claiming that it needs to involve local governments in the discussion and that this process takes time. A divided political opposition and diminished civil

society mean that there is little impetus to reform the system. The local political elite is still not able to take over the running of local government. The majority of them are still tuned into the centralised model and they do not have the political education to run their local councils independently. Both the psychology of local politicians as well as the administrative structure still favour the centralised model. The role of the Central Government is to work together with the local government but what is happening in Ukraine is that the Central Government, using local state administration causes a friction in the local government and seeks to divide and rule. Centralisation has been taking place since 2010 and political and economic power is concentrated in the office of the President and the ruling elite that combine political and commercial interests.

The 2008 crisis, on top of the 20 years of economic problems, impoverished the majority of the Ukrainian population which exacerbated their retreat from the political sphere. They felt and still feel that the ruling elite does not want them in the corridors of power. They are invited and wooed to vote but are not encouraged to actively engage in politics. They also perceive the ruling elite as corrupt and guided by their economic interests. The Ukrainian populace is also deterred from engaging actively in politics as a result of the need to concentrate on developing economic survival strategies. Networks play an important role in developing and supporting the strategies of survival. Through these networks Ukrainians are able to obtain a wide variety of support, from food to help with education, health care and the search for employment. These networks are a backbone of Ukrainian state and society and as such they are a part of all different groups of Ukrainian society. Networks are vital political, social and economic structures. As much as they are helping some Ukrainians to survive they are also helping a smaller minority to enrich themselves. Networks which base their existence only on the exchange of favours, *blat*, as in Soviet times, are based on a smaller number of trusted members. Since Ukrainian society embraced market forces, financial transactions have become more important in these networks. Corruption has become endemic to Ukrainian society and has permeated not only the economic sphere but also public services such as education, health care and social services. Education, and health care are no longer seen in terms of the public good but instead are viewed in terms of private gain. Both education and health care as well as jobs can be bought and they are seen as means to a goal (personal wealth creation) not a goal in its own right. Rather than being the instruments of social cohesion (as we argue they should be), they function as instruments of social exclusion.

As a result of political centralisation, only lip service is paid to the reform of local government and to the process of decentralization. The process of centralization together with the economic recession and high levels of corruption is creating a fragmented society in which there are increasingly less connections between different groups in society.