

## **E-democracy in Ukraine**

Over the last years, Ukraine has significantly advanced in digital / electronic democracy, in particular, in terms of numbers of available e-participation formats, instruments, their usage rates, and impact on public policy (Khutkyy, 2019c). Here the concept of e-democracy is defined “as the collective use of information and communication technology for practices of politics and democracy in both online and offline environments” (van Dijk & Hacker (2018). The advance of e-democracy in Ukraine is credited to the role of the Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity, that has triggered participation, openness of authorities and support by international organizations (Khutkyy, 2019b). The revolutionary momentum was later channelled to multiple reforms and more institutionalized forms of online policy making (Khutkyy, 2019a) and also facilitated the introduction of new avenues for citizen participation on the municipal level (Schmäing, 2023). However, the 2022 Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine posed a serious challenge for Ukraine’s e-democracy. On the one hand, the culture of collaborative governance and participatory democracy, underpinned by the use of digital media facilitated country’s resilience (Huss, 2022), for example, in the form of defensive cyber volunteering efforts (Soesanto, 2022). But on the other hand, some tools like participatory budgeting, were stalled for security reasons. Ukraine’s successful resilience is attributed to the preparedness of local self-governments to absorb shocks, adapt to new circumstances, and stay robust without losing the ability to fulfil their basic functions (Darkovich, Savisko, & Rabinovych 2023). This draws interest to local efforts of harnessing e-democracy instruments for social resilience. To shed light on this, this paper outlines the state of e-democracy in Ukraine prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion using the Dnipropetrovsk region as a case study. The paper is designed to facilitate a more targeted approach to providing training to civil society and authorities in the Dnipropetrovsk region.

## **Governance and politics in the Dnipropetrovsk oblast**

The Dnipropetrovsk oblast (region) is governed by two bodies: one elected by the residents of the region and one appointed by the central government. The Head of the Oblast Council is Mykola Lukashuk, a lawyer elected to the office in December 2020. The Governor of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast is Serhii Lysak, an ex-military and security service officer by appointed to the office by the President of Ukraine in February 2023. The Governor replaced Valentyn Reznichenko who was the Head of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast Military Administration. Although the Dnipropetrovsk oblast is closer to the frontline than the Kyiv oblast, it is away enough from the landline hostilities, so the authority in the oblast was returned from the military administration to the civilian one. Another pattern is the change of governor during wartime, which might reflect political struggle in Ukrainian regions. For example, the Presidential party Servant of the State has not gained any elected mayor during the last local elections, but the party now controls one-third of military administrations in non-occupied cities and as many as ten heads of oblast military administrations are affiliated with the party (Maksymova, 2023). Dnipro city is governed by the Dnipro City Council elected in 2020. The city has been led by Borys Filatov since 2015, a politician who has been elected Dnipro City Mayor twice. Borys Filatov is a member of the minor political party Proposition that is not represented in parliament. Digitalisation in the Dnipro oblast is facilitated by the Department of Digital Transformation, Information Technologies, and E-governance of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast Administration. It is headed by the Chief Digital Transformation Officer Ivan Nachovnyy appointed in May 2021 by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine and the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine.

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<sup>1</sup> *This paper was prepared with the support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia. It reflects the position of the author and doesn’t necessarily coincide with the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia. University of Tartu. December 2023.*

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## **E-democracy in the Dnipropetrovsk oblast**

The available region-wide studies of the Dnipropetrovsk oblast demonstrate a number of challenges. The national statistics indicated the following usage levels in the Dnipropetrovsk oblast in 2020: e-appeals – by 158 authorities; e-petitions – by 30 authorities; e-consultations – by 19 authorities; participatory budgeting – by 35 authorities (Ukrstat, 2020). Transparency and accountability are problematic since only 77.7% of e-consultations in the region have published reports (Ukrstat, 2020). Another source of the state of e-democracy in the region is the Integral digital development index introduced in 2019. Its e-democracy component consists of 11 indicators with scales ranking from 0 (low development level) to 4 (high development level) and the expert evaluations cover 80 territorial communities of the Dnipropetrovsk oblast (Kvitka, Tytarenko, Mazur, 2019). A more focused analysis of the index data revealed a discrepancy between e-democracy in cities (1.15 on average) and in other territorial communities (ranging from 0.28 in village communities to 0.55 in sub-regional communities) (Tytarenko, 2020). The areas of the most significant e-democracy gaps are the following: (i) availability of an e-democracy roadmap – 1.33 in urban agglomerations versus 0.42-0.67 in other territorial communities; (ii) availability of local open data – 1.5 in urban agglomerations versus 0.37-0.8 in other territorial communities; (iii) open budget advance – 0.93 in cities versus 0.00-0.29 in other territorial communities; (iv) e-appeals advance – 1.73 in cities and 1.20 in sub-regions/rayons versus 0.00-0.34 in other territorial communities; (v) e-petitions advance – 2.13 in sub-regions/rayons and 1.35 in cities versus 0.08-0.34 in other territorial communities; (vi) e-democracy capacity-building training for public officials – 1.5 in cities versus 0.00-0.47 in other territorial communities (Tytarenko, 2020). The author identified a set of problems hindering e-democracy development in the region: (a) low awareness of the importance of democracy among civil servants; (b) divergent understanding of core e-democracy concepts among civil servants; (c) the introduction of e-democracy instruments highly depends on personal motivation of public officials; (d) low interest to new e-democracy possibilities among locals.

## **E-democracy in the Dnipro city**

The Dnipro city leads municipal e-democracy in the region. For example, the Transparent Cities project (Transparency International Ukraine, 2023) uses open sources to measure the transparency of the city council's activities, procurement, housing policy, budgeting, financial aid, social services, personnel policy, anti-corruption policy and integrity, land usage and construction policy, municipal enterprises, municipal property, education, investment and economic development, as well as access and participation options for citizens. The ranking demonstrates a solid growth in Dnipro's governance: the level of transparency grew from 25.5 in 2017 to 84.2 in 2021 while the level of accountability increased from 3 in 2020 to 39.8 in 2021. This positions Dnipro's transparency as the third and accountability as the second in the top-100 cities in Ukraine. Furthermore, the Index of Local Electronic Democracy by the Center for Innovations Development (2023) analyses legal documents, online platforms, municipality-provided data, and social media surveys to estimate the level of e-democracy counting e-appeals, e-consultations, e-petitions, and e-participatory budgeting. The index shows a significant growth of e-participation in Dnipro city. The 2018 Index could not rank Dnipro because its municipality did not provide data in response to researchers' requests (Loboyko, Khutkyy, & Iemelianova, 2018). The 2019 Index (Iemelianova, Loboyko, & Mayevska, 2019) evaluated Dnipro's level of e-democracy as 51.2% ranking it as the ninth out of 24 oblast centres. The 2020 Index (Iemelianova & Loboyko, 2020) assessed Dnipro's level of e-democracy as 60.8% ranking it as the tenth out of 31 large Ukrainian cities. It should be noted that the methodology and the compared cities of the cited indices changed therefore the ranking shift might be partially due to the measurement and composition effects. IN addition, Demicheva (2018) identified three levels of (co)participation of locals in the vital activities of the Dnipro city: (1) formal (city referendum, general citizens' meeting at the place of residence, local initiatives, public hearings and councils etc.); (2) semi-formal (participatory budgeting, urban participatory projects etc.); (3) informal (space-specific local actions of like-minded people). The author noted that these are practiced only by few locals because of low trust towards local authorities, distrust in the ability to influence the decisions of public officials, and paternalist mindset.

## **Case study: participatory budgeting in the Dnipro City**

Participatory budgeting was introduced in Dnipro in August 2016. Since then, it progressed considerably. From the first (2017) to the third (2019) participatory budgeting cycle the amount of allocated public funding for participatory budgeting format and the share of completed urban development projects increased (Khutkyy & Avramchenko, 2019). Moreover, between 2018 and 2019, Dnipro's participation rates grew more than threefold – from 3.2% to 10.6% (Schmäing, 2023).

The 2017-2018 period of the Dnipro participatory budgeting was rather turbulent. The authors had to demand reports on the implementation of their projects, which indicates a high level of civic activism but also a low level of public accountability (Khutkyy & Avramchenko, 2019). The situation changed only after several cycles, when project authors studied legal regulations, the authorities learned to cooperate with the public, and productive relationships between the authorities and the authors were established (Khutkyy & Avramchenko, 2019). The ambiguous situation with the Dnipro participatory budgeting might be related to the multiple changes of responsible officials and the participatory budgeting format, as well as allegations of conflict of interest (Khutkyy & Avramchenko, 2019).

The 2019-2020 stage of the Dnipro participatory budgeting was also imperfect, yet an improvement. In May 2019 the municipal government dismissed a city administrator who had been co-responsible for the program on grounds of corruption, which facilitated a smoother project implementation (Schmäing, 2023). Yet, there was a continuous lack of control by project authors over the realisation of projects such as instances of public servants changing project proposals substantially during implementation, up to some projects even taking on a completely different form (Schmäing, 2023).

The 2021 participatory budgeting in the Dnipro city shifted the balance of power towards the project authors. The streamlined participatory budgeting legislation passed by the Dnipro City Council in January 2021 reflected the results of the project authors' efforts and explicitly stated that the project author must approve all changes made by the administration; in cases of disagreement, the Participatory Budgeting Committee (where half of members are locals and half civil servants) would mediate (Schmäing, 2023). Thereby, a public conflict between project authors and authorities led to better-secured rights for project authors and apparently strengthened the bonds amongst them (Schmäing, 2023). Ultimately, the visible results of participatory budgeting in the form of realised projects increased the residents' trust in the program (Schmäing, 2023).

In February 2022, because to the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, for cyber security and public spending optimisation reasons, participatory budgeting in the Dnipro city was put on pause.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Due to its ecosystem of digital infrastructure, high-tech industries, business IT cluster, higher education capacities, and high human capital, the Dnipropetrovsk oblast and especially its cities, including the region centre Dnipro, has a solid potential for advancing e-democracy. This potential is sometimes hindered by political turmoil, which is in turn resolved and counterbalanced by grassroots initiatives. When the public takes initiative, local government demonstrates transparency and accountability, the civil society and authorities establish a dialogue and engage in cooperation, the co-creation and co-production of public goods brings results such as high participation rates, urban development, and mutual trust. Apparently, this depends on the good will and cooperative actions of all stakeholders. Therefore, it is recommended to (1) launch more targeted awareness-raising and educational campaigns among the public; (2) conduct capacity-building training among civil servants; (3) establish joint programmes of dialogue and cooperation between civil servants and civic activists.

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