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Valentyna Romanova

DECENTRALIZATION AND  
MULTILEVEL ELECTIONS IN  
UKRAINE

Reform Dynamics and Party Politics  
in 2010–2021

With a foreword by Kimitaka Matsuzato

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## Endorsements

*Valentyna Romanova provides a detailed analysis ... a valuable book for those interested in Ukrainian politics.* — Paul D'Anieri

*A brilliant and detailed analysis. Based on deep and empirically sound research, this book is a must-read for all students of Ukraine and post-Soviet politics.* — Mikhail Minakov

*Valentyna Romanova presents a rich study based on detailed understanding and years of research of local politics and elections in Ukraine. The book will be an invaluable resource for researchers of post-Soviet Ukrainian politics.* — Paul Chaisty

*Packed with insightful analysis and providing a longue durée outlook, Decentralization and Multilevel Elections in Ukraine is an indispensable read to understand the complexity of uprooting the Soviet legacy in governance. ... profoundly interesting.* — Orysia Lutsevych

*This is a very sophisticated study of decentralization and multilevel elections in Ukraine. The study is very well grounded in theory and provides a wealth of new empirical data to back up its novel conclusions. ... beautifully crafted ... The book makes an important contribution to the field of territorial politics and democratisation in Ukraine, and also to the wider field of comparative studies and local politics.* — Cameron Ross

*This book provides students of Ukrainian politics with amazing and surprising insights into the peculiarities of local power.* — Nicolas Hayoz

*Romanova's book on the most recent reforms in Ukraine is exemplary. The very careful and detailed study of current affairs in local and regional Ukraine makes this a must-read for students of Ukrainian politics.*

— Ulrik Kjær

*A meticulous analysis ... strongly recommended for everybody interested in Ukrainian politics.* — Kataryna Wolczuk



## Foreword

This monograph is a result of Dr. Valentyna Romanova's many years' research on Ukraine's subnational politics and elections. After earning a PhD degree at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy University, she spent four years at the University of Edinburgh to study and teach political science. After returning to Ukraine, she launched her career at the National Institute for Strategic Studies subordinated to the Administration of the President of Ukraine and served three presidents (Viktor Yanukovych, Petro Poroshenko, and Volodymyr Zelenskyy), with an interval when she worked at a private think-tank in Kyiv. Romanova's experience at the president's policy-making institute gave her a chance to observe Ukraine's decentralization reform from within.

As one of the editors of *Regional and Federal Studies*, Romanova gained affluent expertise in subnational politics in post-communist and even other regions of the world. This expertise allows her to exploit an institutionalist approach to analyzing Ukraine's decentralization reform and subnational elections in the light of elites' intentions and alliances. Simultaneously, this book discloses an unknown aspect of Ukraine's political history in this century.

The readers may think that Ukraine's decentralization reform after the Euromaidan Revolution, which enlarged and strengthened basic local authorities and deprived regional (*oblast*) and district (*raion*) authorities of previous competences, was a phenomenon analogous to municipal reforms performed by Visegrad countries in the 1990s. In the latter cases, the reform coalition of central and local politicians abolished meso-level governments or transformed them into state organs, regarding them as bastions of conservative forces. It might also be possible to interpret the center-local coalition in Ukraine as an attempt to weaken regional identities exploitable by separatist forces. However, Romanova's analysis based on the concept of the "advocacy coalition framework" casts doubt to these teleological interpretations. In post-Euromaidan Ukraine, policy-makers pursued both amalgamation of basic

municipalities and municipalization of regions and districts, but only the former was blessed with the formation of an advocacy coalition.

Romanova traces the origin of Ukraine's decentralization reform to Roman Bezsmertnyy's project in 2005. In other words, four presidential administrations, from Viktor Yushchenko to Zelenskyy, harbored the idea of decentralization, irrespective of their geopolitical orientation. In my view, the early origin of amalgamation of municipal units is a natural result of Ukrainian reformers' institutional choice in the 1990s. The Ukrainian Constitution of 1996 defined cities, towns, and villages as municipal units, while making regions and districts units for state administration and having their chief administrators appointed by the president. Thus emerged 10,961 small municipalities with average populations of about 1,500. The small scale of municipalities put their sustainability in question.

Ukraine's bet on villages and towns as the basic unit of local self-government reminds us of Armenia's experience. Independent Armenia not only betted on village soviets as the basic unit of local self-government, but even divided them (which used to be administrative villages in the Soviet era) into spontaneous settlements. In this way, approximately eight hundred municipalities materialized often with a population of a few hundred people in this small country. Moreover, in Armenia, provinces (*marzer*) only had representatives of the central government and never enjoyed the status of an upper tier of self-government.<sup>1</sup>

For both Armenia and Ukraine, amalgamation of municipalities was inevitable. In both countries, this process accelerated after the revolutions (in Ukraine in 2014 and Armenia in 2018) perhaps because the post-revolutionary leaders began to adopt new tactics to win elections, in contrast to the old elites' endeavor to build a nationwide patronal hierarchy of electoral machines. In Armenia,

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1 Kimitaka Matsuzato and Stepan Danielyan, "Faith or Tradition: The Armenian Apostolic Church and Community-Building in Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh," *Religion, State & Society* 41, 1 (2013), p. 24.

the number of municipalities slowly shrank to about five hundred by 2017, but, after the April Revolution in 2018, it decreased to 79 in 2021, with about a twenty thousand population on average.<sup>2</sup> As Romanova notes, the number of Ukraine's municipalities decreased from 10,961 in 2014 to 1,469 in 2020. These enlarged municipalities had an average population of about 13,000. These scales of municipalities in Ukraine and Armenia remind us of *raiony* (districts) before Nikita Khrushchev's policy of *raion* amalgamation in the early 1960s.

In contrast, Russian and Lithuanian state-builders counted on *raiony* as the basic unit of local self-government. The amended Russian Federal Law on the General Principles of Local Self-Government of 2003 made towns and villages the lower tier of local self-government, indeed with a chronic deficit of human and financial resources, while in Lithuania villages and towns were degraded to intra-municipal structures. Remarkably, when Lithuanian reformers designed the new system of local self-government in the 1990s, an option intended to divide the then existing 56 *raiony* and cities into about 90-120 smaller municipalities with average populations of twenty to thirty thousand. One of the possible criteria to demarcate these new *raiony* was the boundaries of pre-Khrushchev *raiony*.<sup>3</sup> In the late 1990s, the then Conservative government established five new *raiony* to reverse its falling popularity, partly responding to the former *raion* central settlements' desire to regain their previous status of which they had been deprived by Khrushchev's amalgamation policy.<sup>4</sup>

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- 2 Interview with Daniel Ioannisyan, advisor of the Government Committee on Constitutional Reform in Armenia, January 21, 2022, Yerevan.
  - 3 My interview with Algirdas Astrauskas, advisor of the Committee on State Administration and Local Self-Government of the Lithuanian Parliament, February 23, 2018, Vilnius.
  - 4 Kimitaka Matsuzato, "The Last Bastion of Unitarism? Local Institutions, Party Politics and Ramifications of EU Accession in Lithuania," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 43, 5 (2002), pp. 362-363.

Thus, we see the ghost of pre-Khrushchev *raiony* wandering in these countries despite the significant demographic changes there since the 1960s.

Another point Romanova makes is the incongruence of national, regional, and local (regional capital) elections. Conventional wisdom in political science regards significant incongruence between elections at various levels as a menace to the integrity of the state or normal functioning of federalism.<sup>5</sup> Subnational elections held before national elections expose potential social trends and facilitate the formation of winning coalitions for the coming national elections, as often happens in Lithuania and Poland. Honeymoon voting<sup>6</sup> is possible not only in parliamentary but also local elections held soon after presidential elections.

In contrast to these merits of electoral congruence for regime survival, Romanova describes inter-electoral incongruence in a positive light. A national ruling party might become the top runner at general elections in a region, but this might not be the case for the same region's regional council and/or regional capital elections.

In my view, an example of the multilevel incongruences of election results beneficial for regime survival was those observed in Russian politics during the 1990s. In 1996, influential governors and ethnic republic presidents described themselves as defenders of local interests, struggling to minimize the negative influence of the erroneous reform policy adopted by the federal government on the local population. As a result, in a series of regions, pro-communist (anti-Yeltsin) voters in the presidential elections voted for their incumbent regional leaders appointed by or coalesced with President Boris Yeltsin in the gubernatorial elections. With hindsight, the multilevel electoral incongruence facilitated the defusing

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5 Peter Ordeshook, "Russia's Party System: Is Russian Federalism Viable?," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 12, 3 (1996), pp. 195-217.

6 Matthew S. Shugart and John M. Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), Chapter 11.

of the population's social discontent and enabled consolidation of a post-communist patronal regime in Russia.

In the 2010-2012 electoral cycle in Ukraine, the vertical electoral incongruence was relatively insignificant since the Party of Regions won the presidential, subnational, and parliamentary elections in a number of regions. This means that Yanukovich had built a nationwide hierarchy of electoral machines with the exception of regions, which did not accept his regime for identity reasons.

In the 2014-2015 electoral cycle, despite the exodus of a significant portion of the pro-Russian vote from Ukraine's electoral scene, the vertical electoral incongruence increased because Poroshenko's party was forced to share the benefits of the Euro-maidan Revolution with other parties. In addition, mayoral parties had already emerged in the 2015 local elections.

In the following period, Poroshenko could not build a nationwide electoral hierarchy indispensable for his reelection because there were neither national nor (statewide) subnational elections during 2016-2018. Moreover, in 2016-2018, the European Union requested Ukraine to adopt the "contest (*konkurs*) principle" in nomination of governor candidates and restricted the president's prerogative to appoint governors at his discretion.

While Poroshenko's electoral defeat in 2019 is explained by his failure in building a nationwide electoral machine, President Zelenskyy rejected it consciously in the 2019-2020 electoral cycle and soon chose to ally with growing mayoral parties. As is well known, conflicts took place between the president and mayors in coping with the pandemic of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, but, after mayoral parties' victories in the local elections, they quickly adjusted their relations. In some regional councils, having lost their previous authority after the completion of local amalgamation, the presidential People's Servant Party and mayoral parties made deals for gubernatorial appointment.

One of the driving forces of the development of mayoral parties in regions of post-Euromaidan Ukraine was to save the lifeline for the population (daily public administration) from polarizing and ideologizing national politics. This motivation met Zelenskyy's desire. Moreover, perhaps Zelenskyy and his administration did

not want to overwhelm themselves with detailed expertise for daily public administration. For the lack of desire to build a nationwide electoral machine and of expertise for providing the population with daily services, which characterizes such post-post-communist politicians as Zelenskyy and Nikol Pashinyan in Armenia, the completion of municipal amalgamation by the 2020 local elections and the alliance with pragmatist mayors after the elections would seem to be a rational choice. Yet the sustainability of this alliance over the head of weakened middle-level governments remains to be seen.

January 30, 2022

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