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Conference paper “Territorial Consolidation in Ukraine Prior to the Russian Military Invasion: Local Consolidation and Its Impact on Elections”

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## Introduction

In this conference paper, I seek to add one explanatory angle to understanding the extent of congruence of Ukraine’s multilevel polity, which became evident once since Russia started its military invasion against the whole country on 24 February 2022.

I examine the implications of the pre-war decentralization reform for the congruence of multilevel elections in Ukraine and find that they – contrary to expectations – benefitted the ruling party that secured one-party rule in the Centre.

After the implementation of the decentralization reform the dissimilarity between the outcomes of the 2019 parliamentary elections and the 2020 regional elections in the same regions increased. High dissimilarity of multilevel elections in Ukraine has not been an issue in the times of piece (Romanova 2015), but not war. The severe drop of popularity of the ruling party at the 2020 regional elections contrasted with the homogeneous electoral support in favour of the newly elected president and his party in 2019. Despite the ruling party performed very poorly at the 2020 regional elections, it significantly enhanced its leadership in regional councils at the subsequent indirect elections of the heads of regional councils. The electoral gains of non-parliamentary parties at the 2020 regional elections peaked, when compared to their electoral performance at the previous regional contests, but the ruling party successfully employed a compromise strategy during negotiations – one of three possible strategies at its disposal – at the indirect elections of the heads of regional councils.

As a result of the indirect elections of the heads of regional councils in 2020, the ruling party did not lose its leadership positions in a single regional council, where it was a frontrunner at the 2020 regional contests. Moreover, the number of the heads of regional councils affiliated with the ruling party increased nearly three times when compared to the number of regions where it was a frontrunner in 2020 (from 4 to 11 regional councils). Notably, in 2020, the ruling party managed to not only secure, but enhance its leadership

positions in regional councils, despite the limited engagement of the centrally appointed regional governors in its party lists.

To support my argument, I refer to the data that I collected and analyzed in my recently published monograph (Romanova 2022).

The structure of the conference paper is as follows. First, I explain the methodology that I employ in my research. Then I briefly outline the context: the pre-war decentralization reform and the electoral rules for parliamentary and regional contests. Next, I examine the dissimilarity of the most recent multilevel elections (2019/2020) in comparison with the previous multilevel contests (2014-2015). Then I investigate the indirect elections of the heads of regional councils in 2020 and 2015 and compare their outcomes. Finally, I conclude.

## **Methodology**

I employ a comparative method, more specifically, the most similar system design, which explains differences or similarities using similar cases that differ from each other only in terms of a key variable. The most similar system design operates with causal arguments that are usually correlational in nature (Garaz 2012). The advantages (and limitations) of the subnational comparative method have been explained in detail in Snyder (2001) – arguably, the foundation of subnational method of inquiry for comparative analysis.

In order to examine the input of the decentralization policy into the scope of congruence of Ukraine's multilevel polity, I compare two cycles of multilevel elections – the parliamentary and regional elections held (i) before and (ii) after the decentralization reform.

The decentralization reform – namely, the policy of local amalgamation – was completed on the eve of the 2020 substate contests; therefore, I categorize the 2020 regional contests as elections held after the implementation of the decentralization reform. I compare the 2019/2020 elections with the previous multilevel electoral cycle, which I categorize as multilevel elections held before the implementation of the decentralization reform. My comparative analysis thus comprises two multilevel electoral cycles: (1) the 2020 substate elections held on 25 October compared to the 2019 parliamentary elections held on 21 July; (2) the 2015 substate contests held on 25 October compared to the 2014 parliamentary elections held on 26 October. The geography and the political regime did not change much during the period of time under study. The major parties in two cycles of multilevel elections under study were different; however, the core cleavage that structured party competition did not change (Chaisty and Whitefield 2020).

I evaluate the scope of congruence of Ukraine's multilevel polity based on (a) the dissimilarity between the electoral outcomes at parliamentary and regional elections in

the same regions and (b) the dissimilarity between the party affiliation of the ruling party in the Centre and the heads of regional councils in the same regions.

I measure the dissimilarity between the electoral outcomes at parliamentary and regional elections in the same regions using the dissimilarity index (Jeffery and Hough 2009; Schakel 2015). In order to calculate it, I add the differences between parliamentary parties' vote shares gained in the parliamentary and either the regional elections in each oblast and then divide the sum by two. This helps me calculate the dissimilarity index for a given region in each multilevel electoral cycle and compute an average – the dissimilarity index for the whole country in each multilevel electoral cycle. In my calculations, I use parties' vote shares scored according to proportional representation rules.

In order to obtain a more nuanced picture for my analysis, I also trace the electoral performance of non-parliamentary parties in each regional council in 2015 and 2020.

Identifying the dissimilarity between the party affiliation of the ruling party in the Centre and the heads of regional councils does not require any special calculations. Initially, I compare the parties that gain the largest vote shares in the parliamentary and regional elections in the same oblasts in each multilevel cycle under investigation. Then I examine the indirect elections of the heads of regional councils in 2015 and 2020. In line with Matsuzato (2002), I compare the party affiliation of the heads of elected regional councils with the parties-frontrunners in the corresponding regional elections, identifying parties' alliances and strategies in the indirect elections.



Matsuzato (2002) identifies two major strategies that parties employ to enable such shifts in elected councils:

- Strategy 1. The frontrunner voluntarily “steps down” and supports another candidate for the position of the head of regional council; this occurs when the frontrunner establishes an alliance with the party that wins the election to obtain some gains/benefits.
- Strategy 2. The frontrunner loses the election when other factions join efforts to disadvantage the frontrunner and support an alternate candidate for the position of the head of the regional council.

Apart from the two strategies, Romanova (2022) identifies Strategy 3, in which the frontrunner fails to secure leadership, but manages to disadvantage its major opponent; finally, the competing leaders agree to nominate a representative of a different faction as a head of a regional council.

Finally, I acknowledge the limitation of my methodology: decentralization is not the only factor that accounts for the incongruence of multilevel elections in Ukraine.

## **Context: Decentralization and Electoral Rules**

The decentralisation reform was launched in April 2014. The reform agenda – the Concept of Reform of Local Self-Government and the Territorial Organisation of Power – included the objective of increasing regional authority in Ukraine by means of granting the directly elected regional councils the constitutional right to establish their executive committees. However, this objective has been postponed for many reasons. Since late 1990s, the centrally appointed heads of regional state administrations have performed the executive powers in relation to both the Centre and regional councils (Matsuzato 2000). At the 2020 regional elections, voters directly elected regional councils (singular: *oblasna rada*; plural: *oblasni rady*). Then regional councils' heads were elected by the corresponding councilors, by means of plurality voting. Since Ukraine's independence, there has been only one case when regional councils' heads have been directly elected by popular vote (in 1994). In Kyiv, voters directly elected a mayor and a city council (singular: *miska rada*) at the 2020 contests. The mayor of Kyiv simultaneously performs the duties of the head of Kyiv city state administration.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, the pre-war decentralisation reform brought many changes to local and subregional authorities. Ukraine's decentralization reform has increased the powers and finances of local authorities in amalgamated territorial communities. In 2015-2020, the policy local amalgamation was implemented: the number of local councils dropped from 10,961 to 1,470 (1,469 + Kyiv). The objective of local amalgamation was to enable amalgamated territorial communities to provide basic public services and foster local development (OECD 2018). In July 2020, the government decreased the number of subregions from 490 to 136 in order to improve the efficiency (and decrease the costs) of public administration in subregions after local amalgamation was completed. The reform slightly decreased the dependence of local authorities in newly amalgamated territorial communities over regional councils and regional executives. Finally, the reform (via the amendments to the Budget Code and the Tax Code) introduced direct inter-budgetary relations between the amalgamated territorial communities and the Centre (Levitas and Djikic 2017). The Ukrainian government completed local amalgamation across the country in advance of the 2020 regional and municipal elections. In 2020, voters elected newly more powerful local authorities, while the responsibilities of regional authorities remained largely unchanged.

In Ukraine, the parliament – the Verkhovna Rada – is made up of one house, elected by popular vote. Apart from 24 oblasts, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the capital city of Kyiv and the city of Sevastopol are regarded as regions. Exceptionally, Kyiv is the only city where a directly elected city mayor simultaneously serves as the head of the

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<sup>1</sup> In 2010-2014, the present appointed the head of Kyiv city state administration other than the directly elected city mayor.

municipal state administration (the regional executive). In other regions, except for regional councils that represent regional self-government, the heads of regional state administrations are centrally appointed.

In 2014 and 2019, the parliament was elected according to a parallel system with a 50:50 split: 50% of the members (MPs) were elected according to first past the post (FPTP) in single-member electoral districts, while another 50% were elected according to closed-list proportional representation rules (CLPR) in multi-member electoral districts. The threshold was five percent. In 2020, regional council elections followed open-list proportional representation rules (OLPR) with a five percent threshold.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, another type of proportional representation rule obtained for regional and municipal council elections: CLPR, with a five percent threshold. Unlike in 2015, the internally displaced persons obtained the right to vote at the 2020 regional contests.

In 2020, as well as in 2015, regional elections were held in 22 oblasts and in the city of Kyiv, because in March 2014 Russia declared its annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea<sup>3</sup> and in April-May 2014 Russia started its hidden military engagement in Donbas (Donetska and Luhanska oblasts). Thus, since 2014, no regional elections have been held in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the city of Sevastopol, Donetska and Luhanska oblasts.

The 2001 Law ‘On Political Parties in Ukraine’ prohibits regional, or non-statewide, parties. To be registered, a party must present 10 thousand voters’ signatures in not less than two-thirds of the districts [rayons] of two-thirds of Ukraine’s regions; that is, in 24 oblasts, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Kyiv, and Sevastopol. In fact, most parties, including parliamentary parties, have heavily regionalized electorates. For analytical purposes, this paper distinguishes between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties. The latter type of parties tends to win seats in one or a few regional councils.

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<sup>2</sup> Local elections in rural and urban localities with less than 10,000 voters were held according to the multi-mandate majoritarian system.

<sup>3</sup> Prior to 2014, voters used to elect regional councils there, like in other regions of Ukraine. According to the Constitution, Ukraine still has one autonomous republic (the Autonomous Republic of Crimea) and a city with a special status located in Crimea (Sevastopol). However, it has been impossible to hold any domestic elections there since 2014. Prior to 2014, voters in the ARC used to elect the regional parliament, which formed the regional government, whose head was appointed and dismissed with the consent of the President of Ukraine; voters in Sevastopol used to elect a city mayor and a city council.

### **Part 1. The dissimilarity between the electoral outcomes at parliamentary and regional elections in the same regions**

After the implementation of the pre-war decentralization reform, the dissimilarity between the electoral outcomes at parliamentary and regional elections in the same regions increased. The increase is significant: from 14.55 (2014/2015 multilevel elections) to 23.72 (2019/2020 multilevel elections) (Table 1; Table 2).

*Table 1. Average dissimilarity indices in the two multilevel electoral cycles under investigation.*

	Average dissimilarity index referring to parliamentary and regional contests
the 2014/2015 multilevel electoral cycle	14.55
the 2019/2020 multilevel electoral cycle	23.72

Source: Author's calculations on the basis of official data from the Central Electoral Commission.

*Table 2. Dissimilarity indices for parliamentary and regional elections in each region in the two multilevel electoral cycles under investigation.*

	The 2014/2015 multilevel electoral cycle	The 2019/2020 multilevel electoral cycle
AR of Crimea	-	-
Vinnytska	15.13	20.19
Volynska	9.33	21.3
Dnipropetrovska	16.11	23.51
Donetska	-	-
Zhytomyrska	14.89	24.71
Zakarpatska	16.57	21.97
Zaporizka	12.4	22.84

Ivano-Frankivska	14.18	22.12
Kyivska	13.29	24.01
Kirovohradska	15.47	28.08
Lvivska	8.41	29.63
Luhanska	-	-
Mykolaivska	19.96	21.18
Odeska	20.82	25.4
Poltavska	13.5	23.55
Rivnenska	21.32	25.62
Sumska	17.16	24.73
Kharkivska	24.61	24.01
Khersonska	12.61	20.69
Khmelnyska	5.63	22.44
Cherkaska	10.9	25.83
Chernivetska	10.79	26.98
Chernihivska	14.35	20.86
Kyiv	15.7	20.91
Sevastopol	-	-
Average	14.55	23.72

Source: Author's calculations on the basis of official data from the Central Electoral Commission.

It is worth highlighting some important nuances. On 21 April 2019, a candidate-challenger with no party won the presidential race with 73% of the vote in the second round and a sizable vote share across the whole country. On 21 July 2021, his brand-new party, Servant of the People, won the early parliamentary elections and obtained the largest vote share in nearly every constituency (Chaisty and Whitefield 2020). It established a one-party majority in the unicameral parliament (the president's party won 254 seats out of 450) and forced one-party rule. Since Ukraine's independence, no political party has gained such overwhelming electoral success. The new ruling party—Servant of the People—did not even need any coalition partners for the central government.

However, at the 2020 substate elections, the electoral performance of the new ruling party, Servant of the People, dropped in each region, compared to the 2019 parliamentary elections. The party's electoral support declined heavily in those regions, where it attracted the highest vote shares at the 2019 parliamentary elections. Its performance did not decrease that significantly in those regions, where its electoral performance was not exceptionally outstanding in 2019 (i.e. in Halychyna and in the capital city). The gap between the best and the worst electoral score of Servant of the People at the 2020 regional elections was 16.7%. It obtained the highest electoral score in Kyivska oblast (26.2%) and the lowest vote shares in Vinnytska oblast (9.5%). Both regions are located in Central Ukraine. Its second-best electoral performance of 25% is found in Sumska oblast in the north, in Mykolaivska oblast in the south, and in Dnipropetrovska oblast in the east of the country. Servant of the People performed the worst in many western regions, when compared to its electoral scores in other regions. In contrast, the gap between its best and its worst electoral scores at the 2019 parliamentary elections was 24.5%: then Servant of the People performed the best in Dnipropetrovska oblast (56.7%) in Eastern Ukraine and scored the least in Ternopilska oblast (31.2%) in Western Ukraine.

Two major parliamentary parties in opposition increased their electoral gains at the 2020 regional elections. Unlike the ruling party, they obtained their highest vote shares in the same regions where they scored the most at the 2019 parliamentary contests. European Solidarity improved its electoral performance nearly in every region, and its vote shares were the highest in Western Ukraine: Lvivska (33.33%), Ternopilska (26.56%), Ivano-Frankivska (20.24%), Rivnenska (20.31%) oblasts, and in the capital region: both Kyivska oblast (29.76%) and the city of Kyiv (25.83%). Opposition Platform enhanced its electoral support in its strongholds in Southern and Eastern Ukraine: It obtained the highest vote shares in Zaporizhka (27.38%), Mykolaivska (28.13%), Odeska (28.57%), Kharkivska (24.17%), Khersonska (23.44%), and Dnipropetrovska (22.5%) oblasts in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. However, the party managed to pass the electoral threshold of 5% only in one region in Western Ukraine – Zakarpatska oblast.

In contrast, at the 2015 regional elections, the ruling party – Petro Poroshenko Bloc – improved its electoral performance in 14 out of 23 regions. It attracted more votes in its electoral strongholds: Western Ukraine (except for Zakarpatska oblast) and the city of Kyiv. But its vote shares dropped in nine out of 23 regions, mostly in Eastern Ukraine. The major opposition party – Opposition Bloc – obtained higher vote shares than at the 2014 parliamentary elections in each region, where it passed the electoral threshold of 5%. Its vote shares increased significantly in its electoral strongholds in Eastern Ukraine, apart from Kharkivska oblast, where it could not contest regional elections due to the imposed administrative barriers (Ogushi 2020). Opposition Bloc did not expand its electoral strongholds very much: it failed to pass the electoral threshold in most oblasts in Western Ukraine.



Thus, the electoral outcomes of the 2020 regional elections did not even resemble the results of the 2019 general contests. But is this research result sufficient to draw final conclusions about the extent of congruence of Ukraine's multilevel polity?

## **Part 2. The dissimilarity between the party affiliation of the ruling party in the Centre and the indirectly elected heads of regional councils**

The enhanced electoral performance of non-parliamentary parties was one of the major factors of the enhanced dissimilarity across the electoral arenas.

The electoral performance of non-parliamentary parties that obtained seats in one or few regional councils has significantly increased in 2020 in comparison to 2015. In 2015, 24 non-parliamentary parties obtained seats in one or few regional councils (Table 3). In 2020, their number increased to 35 (Table 4). At least one and maximum five such parties are found in each regional council elected in 2020. On average, the sum of such parties' vote shares in the regional councils elected in 2020 was approximately 42%; it increased by approximately seven per cent when compared to the 2015 regional elections. Moreover, in 2015, in four regions, there were instances when such parties obtained vote shares close to or above 30% (Volynska, Zakarpatska, and Khmelnytska oblasts in Western Ukraine; Kharkivska oblast in Eastern Ukraine). In 2020, the electoral scores of non-parliamentary parties in five regional councils were close to or above 30%: Cherkasy People (28.13%) in Cherkaska oblast, Ridnyi Dim (29.69%) in Chernihivska oblast, and the Ukrainian Strategy of Hroysman (47.62%) in Vinnytska oblast in Central Ukraine; For the Future (34.38%) in Volynska oblast in Western Ukraine; and Kernes Bloc—Successful Kharkiv (38.33%) in Kharkivska oblast in Eastern Ukraine. Apart from For the Future, these non-parliamentary parties contested regional elections in one region in 2020. They represented territorially bounded groups: the agrarian group in the case of Cherkasy People; and groups led by the city mayors of Chenihiv (Ridnyi Dim), Vinnytsia (Ukrainian Strategy of Hroysman), and Kharkiv (Kernes Bloc—Successful Kharkiv). For the Future had the same title as the parliamentary group established in the parliament in August 2019, and its party leader was a parliamentary deputy (Ihor Palytsia).

*Table 3 about here*

*Table 4 about here*

Before proceeding to examining the dissimilarity between the party affiliation of the ruling party in the Centre and the heads of regional councils, I identified the parties that obtained the largest vote shares in multilevel arenas in each multilevel electoral cycle.

*Table 5. Parties-frontrunners at the two multilevel elections under study.*

	<b>The 2014 parliamentary elections</b>	<b>The 2015 regional elections</b>	<b>The 2019 parliamentary elections</b>	<b>The 2020 regional elections</b>
AR Crimea	-	-	-	-
Vinnytska	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	The Ukrainian Strategy of Hroysman
Volynska	People's Front	UKROP	Servant of the People	For the Future
Dnipropetrovsk a	Opposition Bloc	Opposition Bloc	Servant of the People	Servant of the People
Donetska	-	-	The Opposition Platform – For Life	-
Zhytomyrska	People's Front	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	Servant of the People
Zakarpatska	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	United Center	Servant of the People	<i>Native Zakarpattya</i>
Zaporizka	Opposition Bloc	Opposition Bloc	Servant of the People	Opposition Platform – For Life
Ivano- Frankovska	People's Front	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	Freedom
Kyivska	People's Front	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	European Strategy
Kirovohradska	People's Front	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	Fatherland

Luhanska	-	-	Opposition Platform – For Life	-
Lvivska	People’s Front	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	<i>Holos</i>	European Strategy
Mykolaivska	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Opposition Bloc	Servant of the People	Opposition Platform – For Life
Odeska	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Opposition Bloc	Servant of the People	Opposition Platform – For Life
Poltavska	People’s Front	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	Trust
Rivnenska	People’s Front	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	European Strategy
Sumska	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	Servant of the People
Ternopilska	People’s Front	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	European Strategy
Kharkivska	Opposition Bloc	Renaissance	Servant of the People	Kharkiv Bloc – Successful Kharkiv
Khersonska	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	Opposition Platform – For Life
Khmelnyska	People’s Front	For Concrete Actions	Servant of the People	The Team of Symchyshyn

Cherkaska	People's Front	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	The Cherkasy People
Chernivetska	People's Front	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	Servant of the People
Chernihivska	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	Native Home
Kyiv	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Petro Poroshenko Bloc	Servant of the People	European Strategy
Sevastopol	-	-	-	-

*Source: Based of official data from the Central Electoral Commission.*

*Table 6. The number of cases of congruence between parties-frontrunners in the same oblasts.*

	The 2014/2015 electoral cycle	The 2019/2020 electoral cycle
The number of cases of congruence between the parties that obtained the largest vote shares in the same oblasts in the parliamentary and regional elections	7 out of 23	4 out of 23

Source: Author's calculations on the basis of official data from the Central Electoral Commission.

In the 2019/2020 multilevel electoral cycle, there are only 4 instances out of 23 in which the same party won the largest vote shares in the parliamentary and regional council elections in the same regions. In all four regions, the ruling party, Servant of the People, came first in both the parliamentary and regional elections.

In other words, in 19 out of 23 regions, different parties won the largest vote shares in the 2020 regional council elections and in the 2019 parliamentary contests. Both

parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties contributed to the vertical incongruence between the frontrunners in the parliamentary and regional elections in the same oblasts. In as many as 9 out of 19 regions, non-parliamentary parties obtained the largest vote shares in the 2020 regional elections. A closer look at these nine cases identifies as many as three instances in which the non-parliamentary parties were led by incumbent city mayors and contested regional and municipal elections only in one corresponding oblast.<sup>4</sup> Arguably, those three parties put a priority at the municipal level, because the incumbent city mayors, who led those parties, personally contested the mayoral elections in the corresponding oblast capitals. While the regional council elections were not a priority for them, they still scored more votes than both their parliamentary and non-parliamentary competitors.

In the 2014/2015 electoral cycle, there were seven instances when the frontrunners in the parliamentary and regional elections in the same regions were the same political parties; that number dropped to four in the 2019/2020 multilevel electoral cycle. In only four regions did non-parliamentary parties obtain the largest vote shares in the 2015 regional council elections. In all other instances, parliamentary parties took the lead in the 2015 regional contests. People's Front – the parliamentary party that obtained the largest vote shares in the 2014 parliamentary elections and formed a sizable faction within the parliamentary coalition – decided not to contest the 2015 substate elections. The major reason was its poor institutionalization at the substate scales. This decision greatly affected the extent of vertical incongruence in multilevel elections. In most instances, voters in the regions where People's Front obtained the largest vote shares in the 2014 parliamentary elections (according to proportional representation) switched to supporting the core ruling party, the president's party, the Petro Poroshenko Bloc. However, there were two exceptions. In the Volynska and Khmelnytska oblasts, non-parliamentary parties took the lead in the 2015 regional council elections (UKROP [Ukrainian Association of Patriots] in the Volynska oblast and For Concrete Actions in the Khmelnytska oblast in Western Ukraine).

Notably, in the 2015 contests, the regional governors affiliated with the president's party often led the Petro Poroshenko Bloc's party lists in the regional council elections. They did not vehemently oppose the candidates of the Opposition Bloc, the party's main ideological rival, in the oblasts where it had reasonable electoral prospects; instead, they subsequently became the heads of the regional councils with the support of Opposition Bloc factions. However, on the eve of the 2020 contests, Zelenskyy incorporated only five centrally appointed regional governors into the Servant of the People party lists: two in the Dnipropetrovska and Zaporizka oblasts in the east; and three in the Zakarpatska, Lvivska, and Ternopilska oblasts in the west of the country.

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<sup>4</sup> Kharkiv Bloc – Successful Kharkiv in the Kharkivska *oblast* in Eastern Ukraine; The Team of Symchyshyn in the Khmelnytska *oblast* in Western Ukraine; Native Home in the Chernihivska *oblast* in Central Ukraine.

Cases with the largest vote shares in multilevel arenas in each multilevel electoral cycle do not always correspond to the party affiliation of the heads of regional councils (Romanova 2022).

In 2020, Strategy 1 (The frontrunner voluntarily “steps down” and supports another candidate for the position of the head of regional council; this occurs when the frontrunner establishes an alliance with the party that wins the election to obtain some gains/benefits.) was the most popular, whereas Strategy 2 (The frontrunner loses the election when other factions join efforts to disadvantage the frontrunner and support an alternate candidate for the position of the head of the regional council.) had been actively employed in 2015.

In 2020, there were ten instances when the party affiliation of the heads of regional councils did not align with the parties that came first in the regional elections. In eight of these, candidates belonging to the ruling party, the Servant of the People, won the positions of the heads of regional councils. In the remaining two instances, non-parliamentary parties won. In 2015, there were eleven cases where the party affiliation of the heads of regional councils did not align with the parties that came first in the regional elections.

In the 2015 regional elections, the Petro Poroshenko Bloc obtained the largest vote shares in 14 instances and ended up securing leadership in 14 (though slightly different) regional councils. In contrast, in the 2020 regional elections, Servant of the People obtained the largest vote shares in only four regions, but won 11 positions of the heads of regional councils. Thus, it greatly enhanced its leadership at the regional scales. In 2020, the ruling party in Kyiv employed strategies of confrontation and compromise both to obtain the positions of the heads of regional councils, but the latter was the most popular.

Thus, despite the ruling party performed very poorly at the 2020 regional elections, it significantly enhanced its leadership in regional councils at the subsequent indirect elections of the heads of regional councils. While the electoral gains of non-parliamentary parties at the 2020 regional elections peaked, the ruling party successfully employed a compromise strategy during negotiations – one of three possible strategies at its disposal – at the indirect elections of the heads of regional councils.

## **Discussion**

The implications of the decentralization reform for multilevel elections in Ukraine appeared non-linear and did not undermine the congruence of Ukraine’s multilevel polity. The research results reveal that after the implementation of the pre-war decentralization reform the dissimilarity between the outcomes of the 2019 parliamentary elections and the 2020 regional elections in the same regions increased. Clearly, poor electoral performance of the Servant of the People at the 2020 regional elections contrasted to the outcomes of the 2019 general elections that looked strikingly homogeneous due to the electoral success of the new ruling party in all but one region.

However, the ruling party managed to significantly enhance its leadership in regional councils at the subsequent indirect elections of the heads of regional councils via fruitful negotiations and compromises with non-parliamentary parties, who were the largest beneficiaries of the decentralization reform.

It was reasonable to expect that the ruling party and the opposition parties would seek to increase their representation at the substate scales in 2020. However, the scope of the pre-war decentralization introduced in advance of the 2020 contests was probably not significant enough to generate feasible incentives for the domestic parliamentary parties. They did not make enough of an effort to improve their institutionalization, leading to a loss in competitiveness. As a result, the electoral performance of the non-parliamentary parties improved. This reflected the enhanced capacities of ambitious local incumbents to contest the 2020 elections separately from parliamentary parties and to distance themselves from those (central) actors on whose support they used to rely in previous substate contests. While campaigning, they highlighted their previous experience of serving in local governance and presented the positive changes brought about due to the decentralization reform as their competitive advantages.

Thus, before Russia's full-scale military invasion, the congruence of Ukraine's multilevel polity appeared to be not undermined, but – paradoxically – underscored by the pre-war decentralization reform.

Table 3. Vote shares / seats gained by non-parliamentary parties at the 2020 regional elections.

Regions	Total number of seats in the councils	Non-parliamentary parties that gained seats in the councils	Number of seats gained by each non-parliamentary party	Number of votes scored by each non-parliamentary party	Number of votes scored by non-parliamentary parties
Vinnyska	84	‘The Ukrainian Strategy of Hroysman’ ‘For the Future’	40 7	47.62 8.33	<b>55.95</b>
Volynska	64	‘For the Future’ ‘Freedom’ ‘Agrarian Party of Ukraine’ ‘Power and Dignity’	22 7 5 4	34.38 10.94 7.81 6.25	<b>59.38</b>
Dnipropetrovska	120	‘Proposition’ ‘Vilkul’s Bloc ‘Ukraine’s Perspective’’ ‘Civic Power’	17 16 9	14.17 13.33 7.5	<b>35</b>
Zhytomyrska	64	‘Our Land’ ‘For the Future’ ‘Proposition’ ‘Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko’ ‘Power and Dignity’	9 7 6 5 4	14.06 10.94 9.38 7.81 6.15	<b>48.34</b>
Zakarpatska	64	‘Native Zakarpattyia’ ‘Party of Ukraine’s Hungarians’ ‘Andriy Baloha’s Team’ ‘For the Future’	12 8 7 6	18.85 12.5 10.94 9.38	<b>51.67</b>
Zaporizhka	84	‘Party of Volodymyr Buryak’ ‘For the Future’ ‘Opposition Bloc’	9 8 8	10.71 9.52 9.52	<b>29.75</b>
Ivano-Frankivska	84	‘Freedom’ ‘For the Future’ ‘All-Ukrainian Association ‘Platform of Communities’	18 16 10	21.43 19.05 11.9	<b>52.38</b>
Kyivska	84	‘For the Future’	14	16.67	<b>16.67</b>
Kirovohradska	64	‘For the Future’	5	7.81	<b>23.43</b>



		‘Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko’ ‘Proposition’	5 5	7.81 7.81	
Lvivska	84	‘Self-Reliance’ ‘Freedom’ ‘Ukrainian Halychyna Party’ ‘People’s Movement of Ukraine’ ‘For the Future’	9 6 6 6 6	10.71 7.14 7.14 7.14 7.14	<b>39.27</b>
Mykolaivska	64	‘Our Land’ ‘Proposition’ ‘For the Future’	10 7 5	15.63 10.94 7.81	<b>34.38</b>
Odeska	84	‘Trust Actions’ ‘For the Future’ ‘Shariy’s Party’	11 10 6	13.1 11.9 7.14	<b>32.14</b>
Poltavska	84	‘Trust’ ‘For the Future’ ‘Native City’	16 13 9	19.05 15.48 10.71	<b>45.24</b>
Rivnenska	64	‘For the Future’ ‘Power and Dignity’ ‘Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko’ ‘Freedom’	9 8 6 6	14.06 12.5 9.38 9.38	<b>45.32</b>
Sumska	64	‘Our Land’ ‘For the Future’	8 7	12.5 10.94	<b>23.44</b>
Ternopilska	64	‘Freedom’ ‘For the Future’ ‘Trust’	13 12 9	20.31 18.75 9.38	<b>48.44</b>
Kharkivska	120	‘Kernes’ Bloc – Successful Kharkiv’ ‘Svitlychna’s Bloc – Together’	46 17	38.33 14.17	<b>52.5</b>
Khersonska	64	‘We will Live Here’ ‘Our Land’ ‘Volodymyr Saldo’s Bloc’	13 7 5	20.31 10.94 7.81	<b>39.06</b>
Khmelnyska	64	‘The Team of Symchyshyn’ ‘For the Future’ ‘For Concrete Actions’ ‘Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko’	13 13 10 4	20.31 20.31 15.63 6.25	<b>62.5</b>
Cherkaska	64	‘Cherkasy People’ ‘For the Future’	18 12	28.13 18.75	<b>46.88</b>

Chernivetska	64	‘Yedyna Alternatyva’ ‘Agrarian Party of Ukraine’ ‘For the Future’ ‘Civil Movement ‘People’s Control’	9 7 6 6	14.06 10.94 9.38 9.38	<b>43.76</b>
Chernihivska	64	‘Ridnyi Dim’ ‘Our Land’ ‘Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko’ ‘For the Future’	19 9 7 5	29.69 14.06 10.94 7.81	<b>62.5</b>
Kyiv	120	UDAR ‘Yednist Oleksandra Omelchenko’	37 14	25 11.67	<b>36.67</b>
Average					<b>42.81</b>

Source: The author’s compilation. Data collected from the Central Electoral Committee.

*Table 4. Vote shares / seats gained by non-parliamentary parties at the 2015 regional elections.*

Regions	Total number of seats in the councils	Non-parliamentary parties that gained seats in the councils	Number of seats gained by each non-parliamentary party	Number of votes scored by each non-parliamentary party	Number of votes scored by non-parliamentary parties
Vinnytska	84	‘UKROP’ ‘Freedom’ ‘Agrarian Party of Ukraine’	6 6 6	7.14 7.14 7.14	<b>21.42</b>
Volynska	64	‘UKROP’ ‘Freedom’ ‘Our Land’	17 7 4	26.56 10.94 6.23	<b>43.75</b>
Dnipropetrovska	120	‘UKROP’ ‘Renaissance’	25 10	20.83 8.33	<b>29.16</b>
Zhytomyrska	64	‘UKROP’ ‘Freedom’ ‘People’s Party’	5 5 5	7.81 7.81 7.81	<b>23.43</b>

Zakarpatska	64	'United Centre' 'Renaissance' 'Party of the Hungarians of Ukraine'	19 11 8	29.69 17.19 12.5	<b>59.38</b>
Zaporizhka	84	'UKROP' 'New Politics'	7 6	8.33 7.14	<b>15.47</b>
Ivano-Frankivska	84	'Freedom' 'UKROP' 'Will'	16 12 7	19.05 14.29 8.33	<b>41.67</b>
Kyivska	84	'Freedom' 'UKROP' 'Our Land'	7 7 7	8.33 8.33 8.33	<b>24.99</b>
Kirovohradska	64	'UKROP' 'Freedom' 'Our Land'	5 4 4	7.81 6.25 6.25	<b>20.31</b>
Lvivska	84	'Freedom' 'Civic Position' 'UKROP' 'People's Movement of Ukraine' 'Civic Movement 'People's Control'	12 8 6 5 5	14.29 9.52 7.14 5.95 5.95	<b>42.85</b>
Mykolaivska	64	'Our Land' 'UKROP' 'Left Opposition' 'Renaissance'	10 7 4 4	15.63 10.94 6.25 6.25	<b>39.07</b>
Odeska	84	'Trust Actions' 'Our Land' 'Renaissance'	12 8 8	14.29 9.52 9.52	<b>33.33</b>
Poltavska	84	'Party of Ordinary People of Serhiy Kaplin' 'UKROP' 'Freedom' 'Agrarian Party of Ukraine' 'Renaissance' 'Native City'	8 8 7 7 6 6	9.52 9.52 8.33 8.33 7.14 7.14	<b>49.98</b>
Rivnenska	64	'Freedom' 'Party of Concrete Actions' 'UKROP'	8 6 5	12.5 9.38 7.81	<b>29.69</b>
Sumska	64	'Renaissance'	8	12.5	<b>37.5</b>

		'People's Will'	6	9.38	
		'Freedom'	5	7.81	
		'UKROP'	5	7.81	
Ternopil'ska	64	'Freedom'	13	20.31	<b>39.06</b>
		'Civic Movement 'People's Control'	5	7.81	
		'Civic Position'	4	6.25	
		'UKROP'	3	4.69	
Kharkiv'ska	120	'Renaissance'	50	41.67	<b>50.84</b>
		'Our Land'	11	9.17	
Kherson'ska	64	'Our Land'	7	10.94	<b>20.32</b>
		'UKROP'	6	9.38	
Khmelnytska	64	'For Concrete Actions'	19	22.62	<b>47.62</b>
		'Agrarian Party of Ukraine'	11	13.1	
		'Freedom'	10	11.9	
Cherkaska	64	'Cherkasy People'	16	19.05	<b>51.18</b>
		'Renaissance'	8	9.52	
		'UKROP'	7	8.33	
		'Freedom'	7	8.33	
		'Party of the Veterans of Afganistan'	5	5.95	
Chernivetska	64	'Agrarian Party of Ukraine'	7	10.94	<b>29.69</b>
		'Our Land'	4	6.25	
		'UKROP'	4	6.25	
		'Freedom'	4	6.25	
		'Civic Movement 'People's Control'			
Chernihiv'ska	64	'Our Land'	11	17.19	<b>39.06</b>
		'Agrarian Party of Ukraine'	9	14.06	
		'UKROP'	5	7.81	
Kyiv	120	'Unity'	15	12.5	<b>24.17</b>
		'Freedom'	14	11.67	
Average					<b>35.66</b>

Source: The author's compilation. Data collected from the Central Electoral Committee.

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