

Involving citizens:

Highlights from more than 10 years of Ukrainian-Norwegian research collaboration on local community development and local democracy

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The local level is an important arena for the practice of democracy. It is at the local level that people encounter concrete social problems, and it is above all there that they expect the delivery of effective policies and solutions. Therefore, the local level has been seen as the key location for the appearance and application of democratic initiatives that can eventually lead to transformation of the social and economic sectors in a state as a whole. In Ukraine, despite the existence of various instruments of citizens' interaction with the authorities, a large segment of the population has for various reasons remained detached from the processes of development, adoption, and implementation of governmental decisions. Moreover, many local governmental institutions have failed to use the existing potential for involving the citizenry in solving local problems.

Since 2008, with financial support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), in collaboration with the Association of Ukrainian Cities and the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) and Ukrainian researchers have implemented three consecutive projects in Ukraine that mainly have focused on capacity-building within the local government sector, the strengthening of local democracy, and support for the ongoing decentralization reform in Ukraine. The goals were achieved by a variety of means, including:

- the use of efficiency networks to help local governments optimize their services
- a large-scale local democracy survey among local inhabitants and elected deputies
- the training of local deputies in newly established amalgamated communities
- mini-grants to support selected projects for the improvement of local government services.

In my presentation I will present highlights from this project and explain the efficiency network methodology, present some challenges in regard to development of local democracy in Ukraine (as well as in Norway) and some major findings from the local democracy surveys in Ukraine in the 2014-2017 period.

I will in particular focus on the researcher tasks in the project and the research collaboration between Norwegian and Ukrainian researchers. In addition to providing high-quality and policy-relevant data that has been used by the efficiency networks, the project has aimed to develop researcher skills among both the Ukrainian and Norwegian partners, strengthen the researcher – policy dialogue, and establishing long-lasting research collaboration between Ukrainian and Norwegian universities, research institutions and individual researchers.

Two such major project spin-offs from the project will be presented. The first is a 3-year educational project with collaboration between OsloMet and the Lviv Catholic University and the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy on e-governance. The project involves exchange of students and staff and two joint master courses on how the application of e-governance tools can be used to strengthen local democracy. The first course was held as part of Oslo International Summer School this summer.

The second spin-off is a 3-year project called ARDU, which is a collaboration project between OsloMet and researchers from the Department of Sociology at V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University. ARDU examines how ethnicity, language and regional-local identity interact within the context of political reform in Ukraine. The project's main aim is to find out to what extent, and how, current Ukrainian decentralisation, education and language policies affect social cohesion among ethnocultural groups in two border regions: Kharkiv and Chernivtsi. A team of Ukrainian and Norwegian researchers are just now gathering to conduct the first field work during the next few weeks.