THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT ON CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS IN UKRAINE: A CHANCE FOR REVENGE?

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It is widely accepted that the global pandemic of Covid-2019 has posed a huge challenge to the public administration of every single country in the world and revealed the already existing problems in full scale. Of course, factors such as the density and size of population also matter, but the ensuing healthcare and economic crises became a nightmare for the governments that already had risky 'pre-conditions' for the rapid spread of the virus. That is the pandemic created particularly grave problems for countries with a poorly functioning and unreformed healthcare system, corrupt administration and a lack of coordination between the central and regional power clusters. The Ukrainian government, unfortunately, had all of these circumstances and the emergency response looked hectic – with significant delays in vital procurement and changing the Minister of Healthcare twice since the end of February (RFERL) [1]. The efficiency of the public response to the emergency also depended and still depends on the local self-government leaders and their dedication to impose national lockdown and insure smooth operation of public healthcare units. Some of the local political leaders have openly disobeyed the president's and Cabinet of Ministers' lockdown terms, which has resulted in several open conflicts and even threats from the president in the media to launch an investigation of the reluctancy to comply with the lockdown[2]. Meanwhile, the pandemic has coincided with the forthcoming round of local government elections in the autumn, thus the conflict can be explained with the regional elites being naturally interested in exploiting wide-spread skepticism towards lockdown and building their image of 'efficient fighters'. Due to the fact that most mayors of the Ukrainian biggest cities do not belong to the ruling President-led party, *'Sluha narodu'*, the confrontation has become even sharper. Thus, the aim of the paper is to find out how large is the scale of this conflict between President Zelenskyy's administration and regional elites, and to find out its underlying reasons. The theoretical prism of the paper is 'rational choice' theory, which implies that key actors select their strategies based on cost-benefit ratios.

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[1]Gorchinskaya, K. (2020). Procurement Nightmare: The Wasted Weeks of Ukraine's Coronavirus Response. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. Retrieved on 11.10.2020 from https://www.rferl.org/a/precious-weeks-wasted-health-minister-s-hiring-demand-blocked-crucial-supplies-as-covid-19-hit-ukraine-critics-charge/30542062.html

[2] Zhegulev, I. (2020). Invoking Cossack resistance, Ukrainian mayor defies lockdown measures. U.S. Retrieved on 11.10.2020 from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coroanvirus-ukraine-mayor-idUSKBN22H1X7

The traditional approaches to researching the Ukrainian political situation usually focus on either the central power or regional level. It is also common to acknowledge the persistence of the informal economy and its direct link to vast political corruption, which has been hampering the democratization of political culture and economic transformation since the collapse of Soviet Union. I argue that the leaders of local self-government decided to use the national emergency state to increase their domestic support and deprive the president's party of chances to establish nation-wide political monopoly. The current study has several implications for the study of democracy in Ukraine. Firstly, it contributes to the stream of literature devoted to the role of clans and economic elites in Ukrainian policymaking (Minakov, 2019; Huss & Petrenko) [3] [4]. Secondly, it continues the assessment of Ukraine's success rate in building transparent public administration in post-Poroshenko era (Udovychenko et. al, 2017; Rabinovich et. al, 2018) [5] [6]. Lastly, it links the analysis of Ukrainian COVID-emergency response to the discussion of the biopolitics' dynamics in East European region (Laruelle, 2020) [7].

1. CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS IN UKRAINE THROUGH THE PRISM OF RATIONAL THEORY

The research of regional public policy and Europeanization is often held in the theoretical discourse of neo-institutionalist or rational choice theories. The core difference between the two streams is that the rational choice theory implies that the key actors are individuals, not formal political institutions. This matches well the regional political players of Ukraine, since these still have more structural resemblance to the clan-based networks rather than democratically elected institutions. Of course, clans constitute *informal* instutitions; nevertheless, network analysis based on rational choice theory captures the dynamics better

[3] Minakov, M. (2019). Republic of clans: the evolution of the Ukrainian political system. *Stubborn Structures: Reconceptualizing Post-Communist Regimes*.
[4] Huss, O., & Petrenko, O. (2019). Friends or Foes of Transformation? Economic Elites in Post-Soviet Ukraine– an Introduction. *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte/Economic History Yearbook*, *60*(2), 291-298.
[5] Udovychenko, V., Melnychuk, A., Gnatiuk, O., & Ostapenko, P. (2017). Decentralization reform in Ukraine: assessment of the chosen transformation model. *European Spatial Research and Policy*, *24* (1), 23-40.
[6] Rabinovych, M., Levitas, A., & Umland, A. (2018). Revisiting Decentralization After Maidan: Achievements and Challenges of Ukraine's Local Governance Reform. *Kennan Cable*, *34*.
[7] Laruelle, M. (2020). Post-Soviet State Responses to COVID-19: Making or Breaking Authoritarianism?. *Post-Soviet State Responses to COVID-19: Making or Breaking Authoritarianism?*

than traditional neo-institutional analysis as it is the relationship between clan members more than informal institutional norms that guides the behavior of local Ukrainian political actors.

The history of Ukrainian regional elites originates from the systemic economic and political crisis of USSR, when those who had accumulated the most assets could establish further control over these resources at the macro-level via regional political institutes and compete with the business rivals in 'simulated democracy' elections while the central power in Kyiv would gradually increase its influence[8]. Instead of real political parties, the key players would create what T. Kuzio calls 'leader's fan clubs' or 'oligarch-funded elections projects'[9].

Rational choice would predict that in a country with a large shadow economy, policians will calculate their possible profits which they can obtain through corruption. This has led to a clan-based patronage system with loyalties to local powerbrokers rather than ideologically-based political parties, which in turn has prevented the emergence of genuine political parties. Consequently, old regional leaders often swap their partisan memberships based on their self-interest in a particular set of circumstances. For example, the current mayor of Kharkiv (the second-largest Ukrainian city), Hennady Kernes, used to be an avid supporter of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych until 2014, and continued building his support in the region on a 'peace with Russia' agenda during the local elections of 2015 and afterwards, as the majority of Kharkiv residents did not support continuing the armed resilience in the temporarily occupied Eastern Ukraine. Yet, in 2019 Mr. Kernes publicly swore his loyalty to his ideological opponent, the incumbent president Petro Poroshenko, but quickly returned to the previous 'anti-war' mottos after Poroshenko lost the office to Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

These and other cases show that it's important for mayors to 'be in line' with the central power in Kyiv, which can affect their positions in many ways. Anyhow, it is even more important for them to have control over the local councils, which depends on how well they can predict the attitude of their target audience towards the incumbent Kyiv government. Thus, the strategy of 'adaptation to the center' can be changed to 'opposing the center' only if the latter guarantees support on the elections and the center is too weak to take revenge in case of electoral defeat.

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[8] Minakov, M., & Rojansky, M. (2018). Democracy in Ukraine: Are we there yet?. *Kennan Cable*, (30), 1-17.
[9] Kuzio, T. (2016). Analysis of current events: Structural impediments to reforms in Ukraine. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, *24*(2), 131-138.

2. THE ORIGIN OF REGIONAL ELITES AND THE AFTERMATH OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2019

The circulation of power in independent Ukraine has been linked to the regional elites since the day of independence. The former communist bureaucrats and new businessmen would unite their efforts in establishing control over the region and participate in the national dialogue. Thus, the Constitution of 1996 has created a centralized model of power, which left the regions with few of the collected taxes and made them heavily dependent on the central government. The first attempts to decentralize the country were made already after the 'Orange revolution' of 2005, but it was quickly abandoned as it became evident – giving more power to the local self-government will not contribute to more democracy but will rather empower the regional clans.

It is important, however, to note that when we speak of 'regional elites' in modern Ukraine, they may or may not coincide with regional 'clans'. It is more correct to say that the regional elites mostly exist in the form of clan networks. Under the 'regional elites' per se we propose to understand the political elites, namely a conglomerate of top political managers, who have power to adopt political decisions or influence them. I.e., the regional elites are able to solve political issues in a concrete region and lobby the interests of a respective region on central level. Based on the fact that regional power in Ukraine is mainly represented through local legislature and executives, we can divide the elites in several groups. Firstly, it's the local councils, mayors, and regional administrations. Since local councils and mayors can be re-elected an unlimited number of cycles, they are more stable, but the heads of regional administrations are appointed by the President and their influence depends on the influence of the incumbent President in the region. Secondly, there are the heads of industrial and finance capital groups, who do not have direct political mandate, but have a considerable influence on the politicians to lobby their business interest.

Speaking of regional 'clans', it's possible to describe them best as powerful networks of mutual support, that usually form around a strong leader and maintain their connections irrespective of institutional membership. According to Oleksandr Kriukov, clans are interinstitutional unformal entities that exist in parallel to formal institutes[10]. Historically,

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[10] Крюков О.І. Політико-управлінська еліта України як чинник державотворення: монографія. Київ: Вид-во НАДУ, 2006. 252 с.

Kyiv, Dnipro and Donetsk elites ruled the country, while others did not enjoy nation-wide influence. The presence of clans, in my view, has been the main obstacle for forming new elites, as the only possible way to do it – through political parties, was turned into a formality for those who are already able to come onboard.

The Euromaidan events of 2014 brought to Ukraine a unique chance to rebuild its political system and modernize the economy. In the following years, the government introduced a number of vital reforms (defense, judiciary, education, policing, public healthcare, decentralization, decommunization, civil service etc.), but unfortunately not all of them were accomplished victoriously or supported by the majority[11]. To overcome the Soviet legacy in the national economy and the strong influence of 'oligarchs' on kleptocratic elites would have required a profound political and economic transformation, which did not take place. In 2015, a big decentralization reform began, which aimed to create a European model of decentralized state, and to comply with the requirements of Minsk protocols. Sadly, this reform did not set Ukrainians free from the old local elites, as the political power in the key cities is concentrated in the hands of mayors who had previously accumulated a lot of resources and ousted the competitors to keep being reelected on and on.

Another problem with the decentralization reform has been revealed after the reform already started – the hidden aim of introducing community-based units was to decrease the number of regional units and transfer the public healthcare and educational infrastructure to the regional level of management, leading to the dramatic decrease in the number of schools and hospitals in rural areas. This explains perfectly why only less than 20% of the districts united in the new community-based entities and the reform does not proceed to the next stage at a fast pace. Cornelius Friesendorf once wittily compared Ukrainian police reform to 'institutional bricolage' – 'a legacy relationship involving a mix of new and old institutional elements'[12], and this metaphor became true for many other reforms, where the new rules were layered on the old ones and the lack of funding left the gate open to corruption[13].

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[11] Romaniuk, P., & Semigina, T. (2018). Ukrainian health care system and its chances for successful transition from Soviet legacies. *Globalization and health*, *14*(1), 116.

[12] Friesendorf, C. (2019). Police reform in Ukraine as institutional bricolage. *Problems of Post-Communism*, *66*(2), 109-121.

[13] Trochev, A. (2018). Patronal politics, judicial networks and collective judicial autonomy in post-Soviet Ukraine. *International Political Science Review*, *39*(5), 662-678.

In 2019, the dissatisfaction with the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine, along with a top military procurement scandal [14] and other factors led Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a famous comedian, to a triumphant victory of 72% over the incumbent president, Petro Poroshenko, in the presidential elections. He also won a convincing majority in the Parliament with a freshly created party *'Sluga narodu'* that was claimed to be free from the 'old generation' of politicians.

However, the team of the new president has immediately faced a problem of the approaching 2020 local government elections, which would likely give the ousted elites a chance of revanche, especially if the ambitious reformers fail to meet the demand for change and prosperity. It was impossible to gain the collaboration of many of the mayors (e.g., of Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odesa) for the president's team because of the president's earlier declaration that he would set the country free from the old political and economic groups of the former president in the western part of the Ukraine and the heirs of Viktor Yanukovych in the eastern part. Thus, one of the first steps in the area was an attempt to oust the mayor of Kyiv via re-interpretation of the constitution or direct accusations of corruption[15], which however, did not gain much public support. Volodymyr Klytchko is still in the office with good chances to be re-elected. The next attempt to increase regional influence of the ruling party was the appointment of the regional administration heads, which brought up a new wave of scandals due to their lack of connection with the respective regions or public administration experience.

Finally, in December 2020, the office of the president published a new bill of amendments to the constitution that was supposed to benefit the outcome of negotiations with the occupied territories in the East of Ukraine and make grounds for their participation in the forthcoming elections of 2020. The proposed amendments were criticized by many of the experts and the opposition, as the new local governance model would, inter alia:

[14] Bershidsky, L. (2019). This Graft Scandal May Be Too Much Even for Ukraine. Bloomberg. Retrieved on 10.11.2020 from https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-02-27/ukraine-military-procurement-scandal-shakes-presidential-race

[15] Why Does Ukraine's Zelenskyy Want to Strip Kyiv Mayor Klitschko of Power? (2019, August 4). Retrieved on 10.11.2020 from https://en.hromadske.ua/posts/why-does-the-ukrainian-president-want-to-strip-kyiv-mayor-vitali-klitschko-of-power

- delete the defined list of regions (allowing the central government to create them and change their borders);

- establish an even more powerful institute of presidential representatives, 'prefects', who would be able to appeal to the president about deeming any local regulatory act unconstitutional;

- enable the president to dissolve local councils if any of their decisions will be confirmed as unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Ukraine;

- enable parliament to give special legal status to any territorial unit by an unqualified majority of votes[16].

These ideas were regarded by some as an attempt to further cut down the decentralization reform that was launched in 2015 and establish a new presidential vertical hierarchy. Along with the reasons of political origin, there was a significant economic problem that sparked the conflict with the central power. The decentralization reform has also aimed to allow the regions to have control over the collected taxes, and the critical public sectors were given subventions. Since 2019, many of the budgetary norms were amended and the local budgets shrank, which caused discontent.

Thus, the approaching local government elections of 2020 did not stimulate mayors of the biggest cities to cooperate with the pro-President forces, but rather reminded that after the first year in office the support of the government usually drops significantly (and in February 2020 only 6% of Ukrainians fully supported the Cabinet of Ministers), so taking the opposite direction looked a lot more promising from the 'benefit-cost' perspective.

3. COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN LIGHT OF CENTER-PERIPHERY RELATIONS

The state of emergency in Ukraine and a set of harsh lockdown measures (complete ban of airline, train and bus connections, closure of kindergartens and schools) was promulgated by the president in mid-March, at the same time as most of the European countries. At the time, the government had already experienced a couple of awkward

situations – the evacuation of Ukrainians from Wuhan in February was organized so badly that it faced a public outbreak of violence[17], and in early March 300 thousand medical masks were exported to Spain at the declared price multiple times lower than the market one[18].

This led to the first public disapproval with the total lockdown measures, backed by the long-time mayor of Kharkiv, H. Kernes. Arguing that there are no confirmed or suspected cases in the region, he has refused to stop the work of the underground transportation and to shut down the schools[19]. Anyhow, several days later, after the respective governmental regulations came in force and the President has publicly threated the opponent with a criminal proceeding, all the lockdown requirements have been fulfilled[20].

Within a month public dissent with the lockdown grew, and many local governments decided to seize the measures and allow some markets, shops or even cafes to re-open before the end of the emergency state. The most famous incident happened in a small regional center of Cherkasy, where the mayor has cancelled most of the restrictions for businesses since May 1, before the designated national date of May 11th. As a result, the president and minister of interior have heavily criticized the step, and a criminal proceeding has been launched, but many other mayors supported their colleague and made him a symbol of protest. Non-surprisingly, the popularity of Cherkasy's mayor rose even more after he taped a video address to the President where he accuses the leader of nepotism and double standards and asks why the malls or restaurants of Presidents' allies are still open.

In order to classify all the 'anti-lockdown' regional measures, we make the following scale:

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[16] Українська правда. (2019). Округи та префекти. Як в Україні можуть з'явитися "смотрящіє" від Зеленського. Українська правда. Retrieved on 10.11.2020 from https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2019/12/17/7235047

[17] BBC News. (2020). Coronavirus: Ukraine protesters attack buses carrying China evacuees. BBC News. Retrieved on 10.11.2020 from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51581805

[18] Export of more than 300.000 medical masks purchased at a reduced cost has been exposed. (2020, March 30). Retrieved on 10.11.2020 from http://www.sfs.gov.ua/en/mass-media/news/393244.html

[19] Zaniewicz, M., Piechowska, M. (2020, April 27). Ukraine and COVID-19. Retrieved on 10.11.2020 from https://www.pism.pl/publications/Ukraine_and_COVID19

[20] Ukrainian local elections: Will Zelenskyy win again? - Atlantic Council. (2020, May 27). Retrieved on 10.11.2020 from https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukrainian-local-elections-will-zelenskyy-win-again

0 – no opposition to the central government restriction and/or verbal conflicts with President's regional administration heads;

1 – 1-3 lockdown measures cancelled before May 11th / not introduced March 11th

2 – over 3 lockdown measures cancelled before May 11th, public accusations of President and / or government

Region	n	Region	n
Cherkasy	2	Chernivtsi	1
Kharkiv	2	Kyiv (incl. city)	0
Dnipro	2	Zhytomyr	0
Zakarpattya	1	Poltava	0
Chernihiv	0	Mykolaiv	0
Zaporizhzhya	0	Sumy	0
Luhansk	0	Lviv	0
Donetsk	1	Ivano-Frankivsk	1
Kropyvnytskyi	0	Volyn	1
Khmelnytskyi	0	Ternopil'	0
Rivne	0	Odesa	1

Some mayors of the big cities have also openly supported their colleague from Cherkasy, but most of them did it 'playing safe' – they supported the protest against the 'hypocrisy' of the President's administration, but did not officially cancel the lockdown earlier than was allowed.

As we can see from the table, nine regions have eased the lockdown or lagged behind with introducing such measures. One common feature which unites all of the cases is the reasonings behind the decisions: 'if I don't let the markets open people would kill me' and 'there has to be a regionally diverse approach'. Ironically, even the most contaminated region – Chernivtsi – has expressed support for the markets which opened before May 1st because *'it's the way business is done here'*, according to the mayor.

Another commonality spotted is conflicts between the elected local government heads and the heads of regional administrations appointed by the President. The main 'informal' task of the so-called governors is to facilitate the success of the president's party in the forthcoming elections; thus, the pandemic has turned into a playground to win the hearts of the voters. In Kharkiv, this conflict went public when the mayor and one of the local oligarchs organized an 'anti-crisis headquarters meeting' which the governor did not attend. The rivals accused the presidential representative of being a 'coward' and 'reluctant' to help ordinary people. Another outrage arose in Khmelnytskyi, where the head of administration and the mayors publicly accused one another of causing a delay in the salaries for healthcare workers.

The above-mentioned help to the healthcare workers became another reason for confrontation between the centre and the periphery. In April, the president announced that the frontline doctors and nurses will receive 300% bonuses for their work. But the money allocation took weeks to accomplish, as at first the regions were collecting the statistics for the centre, then the money was sent to the regional administrations, which did not have the respective monetary instruments to calculate the bonuses. Finally, the money was sent to the local councils, and from there to the hospitals, and in some cases the healthcare workers received less money than the others due to differences in local bureaucracy. This has even caused protests in the Vinnytsia region and a parliament deputy had to come in order to clarify that the situation is under control. On the other hand, the incumbent mayor of Kyiv has also stepped in the game and initiated allocating additional money from the city council to help the frontline workers of the capital.

4. Prospects of the local government electoral tensions

It is important to remember that the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed to the public not only the strategic interests of the regional elites, but has also changed in the course of elections campaign, and few of these changes were beneficial for the president's power. Firstly, in early February, the government did not succeed well with the evacuation of Ukrainians from Wuhan. The clear plan of their placement was not communicated to the public or central government, which made conspiracy theories thrive. Consequently, the communities started to protest at the first two initial stations for the evacuees and residents blocked the roads into their towns. In the final destination place, riots started as well, and the inhabitants of the local community threw Molotov cocktails at the bus, which went viral in global media. This incident has revealed the weakness of the central government and gave ground to discussing new political projects that could fulfill the new public demand for 'professional politicians'.

In 2019, there was already an attempt to create a 'regionalist' party, namely 'Trust the deeds', created by the mayors of Kharkiv and Odesa. Their political ambitions to get elected to the parliament were not successful. Nonetheless, the precedent was noticed, and the possible potential of such parties can be considerable. The only limitation is that it's extremely hard to create a regional party that would appeal to the political identities of both pro-western and pro-Russian Ukraine. Therefore, as an attempt to prevent the mayors from such a maneuver, the president's party has registered a bill that would require the candidate parties of the local elections to be nominated from at least 2/3 of the regions of Ukraine, but this idea got heavy criticism and was soon condemned personally by the president.

Finally, this autumn may bring the second wave of the pandemic, and voting can be moved online (which is unlikely as few Ukrainians have digital signature instruments) or postponed, which may disrupt the campaigns and discredit the leaders who fail to demonstrate their efficacy again. The public claim for accelerating decentralization and giving more power to the regions can also create for the anti-Kyiv candidates a risk of being accused of separatism, which can hold down their career.

CONCLUSIONS

Since independence, Ukrainian political culture has been extremely centralized, and local self-government rarely was a large figure on the chess board. Nonetheless, during the Covid-19 crisis, the regional elites took it as a unique opportunity to demonstrate their opposition to the central power and launch the election campaign long before autumn, leaving small chances to Zelenskyy's party to consolidate and promote their candidates.

The core underlying reason behind the sharp confrontation and overwhelming elections success of the President is the same – his lack of evident connections with the old clan-based regional political elites. He has won the support of both pro-European and pro-Russian voters, being not linked to any particular region. The party and the team of the President have been collected quickly and somewhat sporadically, under the motto 'better non-professional but non-corrupt'. Unfortunately, in September the country has witnessed numerous reputational scandals of the new team and resulted in the first Cabinet of Ministers resigning already in early February 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic left less time and resources to oppose the disobedient mayors in the autumn, but even if the ruling party does not win the key cities, they will at least have fractions in the regional councils, that will build the ground for further negotiations and maybe even painful compromises with regional elites.

From this conflict we can see that the institutional changes in Ukraine, launched in 2014, have not been able yet to remove the powerful individual actors of regional clan networks and to establish a new political culture. Some experts have discussed the possibility of extending the 'lustration' purge on the local governments, but this measure seems to be an outdated and too radical response in the given circumstances. The potential of 'anti-lockdown' political mainstream in the regions also demonstrates a worrying trend of low media literacy and lack of trust to the narratives shared by the central authorities. It is important to continue resisting oligarchy and building new institutions, based on democratic values and preserve the benefits of decentralization reforms.