Statement on 2018 Election System Week in Ukraine
April 6, 2018

Ukraine has undertaken a series of election system changes as its democracy has evolved over the last 25 years. However, system reform remains high on the agenda as Ukrainians adapt laws to match their new realities.

On November 7, 2017, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted Draft Election Code No 3112-1 on first reading. The Draft Election Code was sponsored by Andrii Parubii, Leonid Yemets (both from the Peoples’ Front faction) and Olexandr Chernenko (from the Petro Poroshenko Bloc) and supported by a narrow majority of 226 Members of Parliament. It harmonizes election procedures for parliamentary, presidential and local elections and proposes introduction of an open-list proportional representation (PR) system for parliamentary and local council elections (such as elections to oblast councils and city councils in cities with more than 90,000 voters).

During the first week of April 2018, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the Venice Commission and USAID’s Responsible Accountable Democratic Assembly Program organized a series of events as part of the Electoral Systems Week initiative. The week provided a platform for electoral experts, academics, politicians and other public affairs stakeholders to exchange ideas on electoral system design for legislative and local elections in Ukraine.

There was a consensus around the following findings:

1) Electoral system reform remains a significant tool to improve the vibrancy of Ukrainian democracy. Abolition of single member districts, a move to a region-based list proportional system and an appropriately crafted open list mechanism may help improve voter accountability, political party cohesion and government stability.

2) A move to open list proportional system may well improve accountability and the ability of voters to remove under-performing MPs. The reform is also fulfilment of promises made by the government upon its election after the Maidan’s Revolution of Dignity. Nevertheless, a move to open lists may generate several potential problems including internal party fragmentation where candidates of the same party are pitted against each other as well as voter confusion on how to most effectively cast a ballot. These problems should be carefully assessed before the final decision on electoral system change is made.
None of the electoral systems should be viewed as a panacea for weaknesses of the Ukrainian political system. Electoral systems may perform differently depending on a country’s political context.

Any reform abolishing single-mandate districts, moving from closed to open lists and reducing district magnitudes will impact women’s chances to be elected and gender balance in public office. This illustrates the need to mainstream gender issues within electoral system reform discussions beyond the question of gender quotas.

In sum, moving away from single-mandate districts will improve women’s access to elected office.

Women’s voices in politics should not be conflated with raw numbers. Influence is also dependent on popular legitimacy, access to decision-making positions and individual capacity. However, increasing numbers of women in the Verkhovna Rada will support efforts for greater gender equality.

Participants welcomed establishment of a Working Group by the Parliamentary Committee on Legal Policy and Judiciary to prepare the Draft Election Code for the second reading. The Working Group should organize its work in a transparent, inclusive, thorough and expedited manner. It is crucial election reform takes place sufficiently in advance of next year’s elections.