Access to political participation and inclusion in electoral processes for all people is a cornerstone of democracy. Since Ukraine’s democratic transition, citizens with disabilities have often been unable to exercise their political and electoral rights due to legal, physical, societal and informational barriers. This lack of inclusion often deprives them of the opportunity to not only participate at the polling station on election day, but also is an obstacle to their full participation in the formation and development of policies and decisions that impact their lives. Both globally and in Ukraine, IFES works together with key national partners to improve the accessibility to political and public life, advocate for the full inclusion of all citizens in democratic processes.

Legislative Reform

IFES works closely with the disability rights community, disabled persons organizations (DPOs), civil society, election management and legislators to review and advocate for the reformation of laws that limit access for people with disabilities. In 2016, IFES and DPO partners analyzed national legislation to identify legal obstacles to political and electoral rights for people with disabilities. This review revealed that laws and regulations addressing elections, referenda and voter registration include both barriers to access as well as gaps in terms of reasonable accommodation. Legislative provisions are not uniform and do not complement each other. In 2017, IFES and DPOs developed a set of amendments to the draft electoral code aimed at strengthening electoral accessibility for and inclusion of people with disabilities.

IFES continues to work with stakeholders to improve electoral legislation and procedures to ensure voters with disabilities have the option to vote in-person, secretly and independently at accessible polling stations.

Auditing and Monitoring of Polling Stations for Access

Since 2016, IFES has partnered with the National Assembly of People with Disabilities (NAPD) to conduct accessibility audits of polling stations in Poltava. The results of this audit concluded that only three polling stations in the region were fully accessible while 41.6 percent were partially accessible for persons with disabilities or low mobility. In 2019, the NAPD audited polling stations in Lviv, Kramatorsk and Kyiv. After audits are complete, NAPD then conducts meetings and consultations with national and local authorities and polling station property owners to present assessment findings and recommendations on improving electoral accessibility for persons with disabilities.

A methodology toolkit on how to conduct accessibility audits of polling stations with recommendations and strategies to improve electoral process inclusivity was developed and distributed in all regions of Ukraine.

IFES also works closely with observer groups to highlight access for persons with disabilities, and encourage cooperation with the disability rights community during monitoring missions.
Advocacy and Awareness

According to a national survey conducted by IFES in 2019, 93 percent of Ukrainians believe that persons with disabilities should have equal access to elections and political life, with 77 percent of respondents supporting improved accessibility to polling stations. Despite this public support, polling stations remain largely inaccessible with significant obstacles to participation in other aspects of political life.

IFES regularly brings together the Central Election Commission (CEC), DPO representatives, the Ministry of Social Policy, the Office of the Commissioner of the President on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, political parties, and other electoral stakeholders to advocate for and discuss the rights of people with disabilities to vote and run for office. IFES organizes public events to create a platform for interaction and discussion among decision-makers where joint strategies and solutions are generated.

IFES works closely with the CEC to develop advocacy and training materials aimed to make electoral inclusiveness a priority for government agencies. IFES and the IFES-CEC Training Center reviews the accessibility and inclusion section of the training manual for Precinct Election Commission members ahead of all elections. Together, they provide guidelines and recommendations on arranging the polling station layout with consideration for persons with disabilities. These joint efforts are supplemented by the distribution of leaflets for PEC members at every polling station before election day. In 2016, the IFES-CEC Training Center launched a pilot module addressing accessibility and inclusion in the electoral process as part of the Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) program.

Voter Education

Access to information on how, where and why to vote is often inaccessible for people with disabilities. In partnership with DPOs, IFES concentrated on raising awareness through voter education prior to both the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019. Printed and audio guideline materials were developed and distributed to audiences with disabilities in advance of Election Day.

An electoral accessibility video highlighting the proactivity and persistence of persons with disabilities to gain access to the electoral process was developed and publicized to raise awareness of how to improve access to polling stations.

Political Rights of People with Intellectual and Psychosocial Disabilities

People with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities continue to face obstacles to their participation in political life around the world, including Ukraine. In 2019, IFES Ukraine conducted a seminar on the political rights of people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, highlighting obstacles in current legislation. An advocacy brief was distributed afterwards outlining the need to ensure political rights of people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities in Ukraine.

In advance of the 2019 Verkhovna Rada elections, IFES and the Coalition of Organizations of People with Intellectual Disabilities developed and distributed informational and motivational leaflets for voters with intellectual disabilities and their family members. The leaflet, designed in an easy-to-read format, outlines the electoral process in Ukraine, including pre-election procedures.

IFES Ukraine emphasizes tolerance, accessibility and inclusion in all its programming and reporting. It holds accessible and inclusive meetings, trainings and events and encourages participants with different disabilities to participate and actively engage. Images of persons with different disabilities are integrated into IFES programming materials to challenge societal stereotypes, destigmatize disability and raise awareness of rights.

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