



Bridging Regions: Understanding Regional Governance in Norway and Ukraine

A Foundation for International Cooperation at the Regional Level



KOMMUNESEKTORENS ORGANISASJON

The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities

Prepared by: KS – The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities

Date: November 2025

Frontpage picture: Preobrazhensky Bridge. Alexey Tolmachov / Wikimedia Commons, Media-ID:374324

Foreword

This report provides a summary of the themes and presentations from the webinar on regional authorities in Norway and Ukraine, held in November 2025. The event brought together over 75 participants from both countries, primarily representing regional and local authorities, to foster mutual understanding and explore avenues for cooperation and reform.

Key findings include:

- Both Norway and Ukraine have multi-level governance systems, but with significant differences in the distribution of powers, the relationship between elected and state authorities, and the degree of decentralization.
- Ukrainian regional reform is at a critical juncture, with clear commitments to European standards but facing challenges related to legal frameworks, administrative capacity, and the ongoing war.
- Norwegian experience in decentralization, inter-local government cooperation, and the balance between state supervision and local autonomy offers valuable lessons for Ukraine.
- Cooperation involving regional authorities can be organized in different ways. Two relevant options are either Norwegian county council-to-Ukrainian local government cooperation, and Norwegian county council/county governor-to-Ukrainian oblast rada/military administration-cooperation.
- County council-to-local government cooperation may involve exchange of experience and capacity building related to specific tasks and services.
- County council/county governor-to-oblast rada/military administration may involve exchange of experience related to the reform process at the regional level in Ukraine.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the organizations that contributed to the success of the webinar and provided valuable comments to this report. Special thanks go to the organizations that delivered presentations during the event, including the County Governor in Trøndelag, Trøndelag County Council, Dnipropetrovsk Regional Council, the Dnipropetrovsk Regional State (Military) Administration and the Kryvyi Rih District Council. We also wish to thank the Ukrainian Association of Rayon and Oblast Councils (UAROR), the Association of Ukrainian Cities (AUC) and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) for their active participation and insightful feedback to this summary.

In lieu of gifts for the speakers, a donation was made to Norwegian-Ukrainian Fire and Ambulance Support (NUBAS), reflecting our shared commitment to solidarity and practical assistance.

The content of this report, including any errors or omissions, remains the sole responsibility of KS.

Table of Content

Foreword	3
Acknowledgements	4
Introduction.....	6
Legal Frameworks and Institutional Context.....	7
Norway.....	7
Ukraine.....	7
Roles and Responsibilities of Local Governments.....	9
Norwegian Local Governments.....	9
Ukrainian Local Governments.....	9
Comparative Table: Local Government.....	10
Elected Regional Authorities.....	12
Norwegian County Councils.....	12
Ukrainian Oblast and Rayon Councils.....	13
Comparative Table: Elected Regional Level.....	13
Regional State Authorities	15
The County Governor in Norway.....	15
The Governor/Regional Military Administration in Ukraine	15
Comparative Table: State Regional Level	16
The Reform Process in Ukraine.....	18
Opportunities for Cooperation on the Regional Level.....	19
Model 1 — County Council ↔ Hromada (Local Government).....	20
Model 2 — County Council ↔ <i>Oblasna Rada</i> (and <i>Rayonna Rada</i>).....	20
Model 3 — Cooperation Between Regional State Administrations.....	21
Model 4 — Dual-Structure Cooperation (Elected Bodies + State Repr.).....	21
Conclusion.....	23

Introduction

This report is prepared as a follow-up to the webinar “Bridging Regions: Understanding Regional Governance in Norway and Ukraine,” held on November 12, 2025. The initiative was organized by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) in close cooperation with the Ukrainian Association of Rayon and Oblast Councils (UAROR) and the Association of Ukrainian Cities (AUC), within the framework of the Bridges of Trust (BoT) community of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR).

The event was organized to strengthen mutual understanding of regional governance systems and the structures, roles, and responsibilities of regional and local governments in Norway and Ukraine (see the program in Appendix 1). Further, the webinar provided a forum to explore opportunities for cooperation, particularly in the context of Ukraine’s ongoing reform process and European integration.

The primary purpose of the report is to serve as a practical resource for how international cooperation at the regional level can be organized, with a particular focus on Norwegian–Ukrainian collaboration.

Legal Frameworks and Institutional Context

A clear understanding of the legal frameworks governing local and regional governments is essential for analyzing both the current situation and reform prospects in Norway and Ukraine. This section summarizes the key legal foundations and reference points discussed during the webinar and in supporting documentation.

Norway

Norwegian local and regional governance is grounded in the principle of local self-government, enshrined in the Norwegian Constitution, the Local Government Act (*Lov om kommuner og fylkeskommuner*) and a series of sectoral laws and regulations. The legal framework establishes the autonomy of local governments and county councils, defining their responsibilities, financial arrangements, and the relationship with the state. The “generalist principle” ensures that all local governments have the same core responsibilities, regardless of size or capacity.

The County Governor (*statsforvalter*) acts as the state’s supervisory authority, ensuring that local government and county decisions comply with national laws and regulations. The role and duties of the County Governor are described in the Instructions for County Governors (*Instruks for statsforvaltere*) and in various sectoral laws, such as the Local Government Act (*Lov om kommuner og fylkeskommuner*), the Child Welfare Act (*Lov om barnevern*), and the Civil Protection Act (*Lov om sivil beskyttelse og beredskap*).

Ukraine

Ukraine’s legal framework for local and regional governance is defined by the Constitution of Ukraine, the Law “On Local Self-Government in Ukraine” (*Про місцеве самоврядування в Україні*), and a series of sectoral laws and codes (e.g., Budget Code, Tax Code, Land Code). The Constitution recognizes local self-government and sets out the structure of territorial communities, districts (*rayons*), and regions (*oblasts*).

The Law “On Local State Administrations” (*Про місцеві державні адміністрації*) defines the powers and functions of state-appointed regional and district administrations.

Ukraine launched a comprehensive decentralization reform in 2014 as part of its strategy to strengthen local democracy and improve public service delivery. Key elements included a territorial reform with the amalgamation of smaller communities into larger local governments (*hromadas*), an administrative reform with the transferal of significant powers and resources from the central government to local governments, a fiscal decentralization to increase local revenue autonomy, and the introduction of mechanisms for citizen participation.

Roles and Responsibilities of Local Governments

This section provides a comparative overview of the roles and responsibilities of local governments in Norway and Ukraine. Even though the topic of the webinar and this report is regional authorities, it is important to also understand the roles and responsibilities of local governments.

Norwegian Local Governments

Norwegian local governments are the foundation of local self-government in Norway. There are 357 local governments, each with equal legal responsibilities regardless of size (the “generalist principle”). Local governments are governed by directly elected councils and have significant autonomy but are subject to legal supervision—primarily through the County Governor (statsforvalter), though other state authorities may also exercise control.

Norwegian local governments have an important role in facilitating various forms of participation and user involvement. They are responsible for core welfare and community services. They manage education from kindergarten through lower secondary school, primary healthcare and elderly care, and social services such as child welfare and housing. They also oversee local infrastructure—roads, water, waste management—along with cultural and recreational facilities, spatial planning, and fire and rescue services. These tasks reflect their central role in ensuring quality of life and sustainable local development.

Furthermore, local governments can voluntarily take on tasks that are not assigned to other public or private bodies, for example tasks within culture, industry and the natural environment.

Ukrainian Local Governments

Ukrainian local governments (*hromadas*) are the basic units of local self-government and have undergone significant transformation through decentralization reforms since 2014. The reforms have expanded their responsibilities and financial autonomy. There

are 1,469 local governments following the final configuration after the 2020 reform, each with elected councils and mayors. The capital Kyiv has a special status.

The local governments manage education from pre-school to secondary level, primary and secondary healthcare, and social protection services.¹ Other tasks include local infrastructure such as roads, water, heating, and waste management, as well as cultural institutions, libraries, and sports facilities. They oversee land and property management, spatial planning, and local economic regulation, while also handling budgeting and fiscal management. Under martial law, they additionally provide civil protection, humanitarian aid, and support for internally displaced persons.

Comparative Table: Local Government

Norwegian and Ukrainian local governments share many common responsibilities, such as education, health, social services, infrastructure, and culture. The difference lies in scope and context: for instance, in Norway local governments have the responsibility for primary and lower secondary education and primary healthcare services, while Ukrainian local governments' responsibilities also include upper secondary education and secondary healthcare, however, limited to the management and development of the institutional facilities.

During the war, Ukrainian local governments have taken on additional responsibilities for civil protection, humanitarian aid, assistance to internally displaced persons, psychological support, mobilisation and territorial defence.

¹ Teachers' salaries are mainly funded by state subsidies transferred to local budgets, while local governments cover school maintenance and may supplement salaries. After the 2020 healthcare reform, most medical personnel are paid through contracts with the National Health Service of Ukraine (NHSU), funded by the state. Local governments remain responsible for maintaining educational and healthcare facilities.

Function/ Responsibility	Norway	Ukraine
Education	Kindergarten, primary, lower secondary (1-10 grades)	Maintenance and development of pre-school, general secondary, and extracurricular education institutions
Health & Care	Primary health care, care for the elderly and disabled (home-based or in institutions)	Maintenance and development of primary and secondary healthcare institutions
Social Services	Child welfare, housing, social support	Social security, provision of social services
Administrative Services	Building permits, licenses for local businesses, registrations	Granting of permits, approvals, registrations
Infrastructure	Local roads, water supply, wastewater, waste management	Local roads, water management, heat supply, waste management, local public transport
Culture and Sports	Local culture, libraries, sports facilities	Maintenance of cultural institutions, libraries, sports facilities
Planning	Local spatial and community planning	Strategic/territorial planning, management of municipal property and land, environment protection
Public Safety	Fire and rescue, civil protection	Civil protection, humanitarian aid

Elected Regional Authorities

Norwegian County Councils

Norway's 15 county councils (*fylkeskommuner*) constitute the elected regional level in the country. Each county council is directly elected and governed by a county mayor and an executive board. The county councils play a central role in coordinating regional strategies and supporting the municipalities within their area.

Among their most important responsibilities is upper secondary education and vocational training, where the county councils are responsible for schools for youth aged 16 to 19. They are also responsible for regional transport, including county roads and public transport such as buses and ferries.

Furthermore, the county councils are responsible for culture and sports at the regional level, including the operation and development of regional cultural institutions and sports facilities. Other important tasks include environmental protection and climate measures, integration of immigrants, and cultural heritage preservation.

Public health work is also an important task, with responsibility for dental care and various public health initiatives. In addition, the county councils play a key role in regional development, both in terms of economic development and regional planning. The county councils also have important responsibilities in civil protection and emergency preparedness, such as conducting national and regional elections and ensuring civil transport.

Through these tasks, the county councils contribute to strengthening societal development and ensuring good services for residents throughout the county.

Norwegian County Councils participate in international activities. The EUs programs for education (Erasmus+) and cross-border cooperation (Interreg) are highly relevant and widely used. Many County Councils have friendship regions in Europe and elsewhere in the world. The EEA and Norway Grants provide opportunities for local and regional cooperation between Norway and countries in Central and Southern Europe.

Ukrainian Oblast and Rayon Councils

In Ukraine, the regional level of governance consists of region (*oblast*) and district (*rayon*) councils, both of which are elected bodies. Ukraine has 24 oblast councils and 136 rayon councils, and both levels are directly elected by the population. The oblast and rayon councils represent the interests of territorial communities at the regional and subregional levels, respectively. Following recent administrative reforms, the role of the rayon councils has been reduced, and much of the executive authority now lies with state administrations rather than with the elected councils.

The main tasks of the oblast councils include approving regional development programs and budgets, managing regional property and institutions (such as hospitals and cultural institutions), as well as overseeing regional infrastructure and social services. They also play an important role in representing the interests of local governments at the regional level and in coordinating with state administrations. The rayon councils have similar functions at the subregional level, with particular emphasis on representing local governments, coordinating inter-municipal cooperation, and approving local development programs.

A key challenge for both oblast and rayon councils is their limited executive authority, as executive functions are largely carried out by state administrations. This limits the councils' ability to exercise real influence and implement their own decisions.

Comparative Table: Elected Regional Level

Both Norway and Ukraine have elected regional bodies, but there are significant differences in their roles and authority. Norwegian county councils possess their own executive bodies, whereas the executive authority of Ukrainian oblast and rayon councils is limited, as most practical implementation is carried out by state administrations.

Function/ Responsibility	Norway (County Council)	Ukraine (Oblast Council)	Ukraine (Rayon Council)
Education	Upper Secondary Education, vocational training		
Health & Care	Dental care, public health	Maintenance and development of regional hospitals institutions	
Social Services		Overseeing regional social services	
Infrastructure	County roads, public transport (buses, ferries)	Overseeing regional infrastructure	
Culture and Sports	Operation of regional cultural institutions and sports facilities, subsidies for cultural and sports events	Maintenance and development of regional cultural institutions	
Planning	County planning, economic development, environmental protection, climate measures	Approving regional development programs and budgets	Coordinating inter-local government cooperation; approving local development programs
Public Safety	Conducting national and regional elections, civil transport		

Regional State Authorities

The County Governor in Norway

The County Governor (statsforvalter) is the government's representative at the regional level in Norway, mandated by the central government. This office serves as a vital link between national authorities and local and regional governments. The County Governor's main responsibility is to ensure that local governments and county councils act in accordance with national laws and regulations, providing legal oversight and supervision.

In addition to legal supervision, the County Governor coordinates the implementation of national policies at the regional and local levels. The office acts as an administrative appeals body for decisions made by local governments, ensuring that citizens have a channel for complaints and appeals. The County Governor also plays a key role in civil protection, emergency preparedness, and crisis management, coordinating efforts during emergencies and ensuring that local authorities are prepared to handle crises.

Through these functions, the County Governor helps maintain the rule of law, supports the effective implementation of national policies, and strengthens cooperation between different levels of government in Norway.

The Governor/Regional Military Administration in Ukraine

In Ukraine, the regional state administration (RSA) or, under martial law, the regional military administration (RMA), serves as the central executive authority at the oblast (regional) level. The governor is appointed by the President of Ukraine and leads the oblast state administration. During periods of martial law, this role is merged with the Regional Military Administration, combining both civil and military functions.

The main responsibilities of the governor and the administration include ensuring the implementation of state policy in economy, social protection, education, healthcare, ecology, etc, as well as coordinating the activities of territorial branches of ministries and state agencies. The administration is tasked with implementing state policy in key

areas such as the economy, social protection, education, and healthcare at the regional level.

Under martial law, the governor's role expands to include civil-military responsibilities, such as ensuring defense, security, humanitarian aid, and the protection of critical infrastructure. The governor and the administration thus play a crucial role in maintaining order, delivering essential services, and coordinating emergency responses in times of crisis.

Through these functions, the governor and the regional administration act as the main link between the central government and the regions, ensuring that national priorities and policies are effectively carried out at the oblast level.

Comparative Table: State Regional Level

Both Norway and Ukraine have state-appointed authorities at the regional level, but their roles and powers differ significantly. While both systems ensure state oversight at the regional level, the Ukrainian model grants broader powers, especially under martial law, whereas the Norwegian County Governor's role is more limited to legal and administrative function.

Function/Responsibility	Norway (County Governor)	Ukraine (Governor/RMA)
Appointment	Central government	President of Ukraine
Supervision of Local and Regional Authorities	Legal supervision of local governments and county councils	Monitors legality and compliance with national laws
Policy Implementation	Monitors implementation of national policies at the regional/local level	Executes state policy in economy, social protection, education, healthcare, etc.
Appeals	Administrative appeals body for local government decisions	
Crisis Management	Coordinating crisis management; supervision of emergency planning in local government	Yes (especially under martial law)
Military Role	Coordinator and liaison between central and local authorities in the event of war and regional coordination with regional police and military authorities	Under martial law, responsible for defence, security, humanitarian aid, and critical infrastructure

The Reform Process in Ukraine

Ukraine's regional governance system is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by the need to complete decentralization reforms and align with European standards. Despite significant progress since 2014, several challenges remain at the regional level. One of the most pressing issues is the overlapping competencies between elected councils and state administrations. This lack of clarity often leads to duplication of functions and conflicts over authority, undermining efficiency and accountability.

Regional state administrations serve both as regional executive bodies of state power, implementing national mandates in their territories, and, in practice, perform many delegated functions that, in European models, would belong to the executive bodies of elected oblast and rayon councils. Oblast and rayon councils still lack independent executive bodies, leaving them dependent on state administrations for implementation of decisions. This structural imbalance limits the councils' ability to act as genuine decision-makers and weakens democratic governance. Financial dependence is another critical challenge. Regional authorities rely heavily on earmarked transfers from the central government.

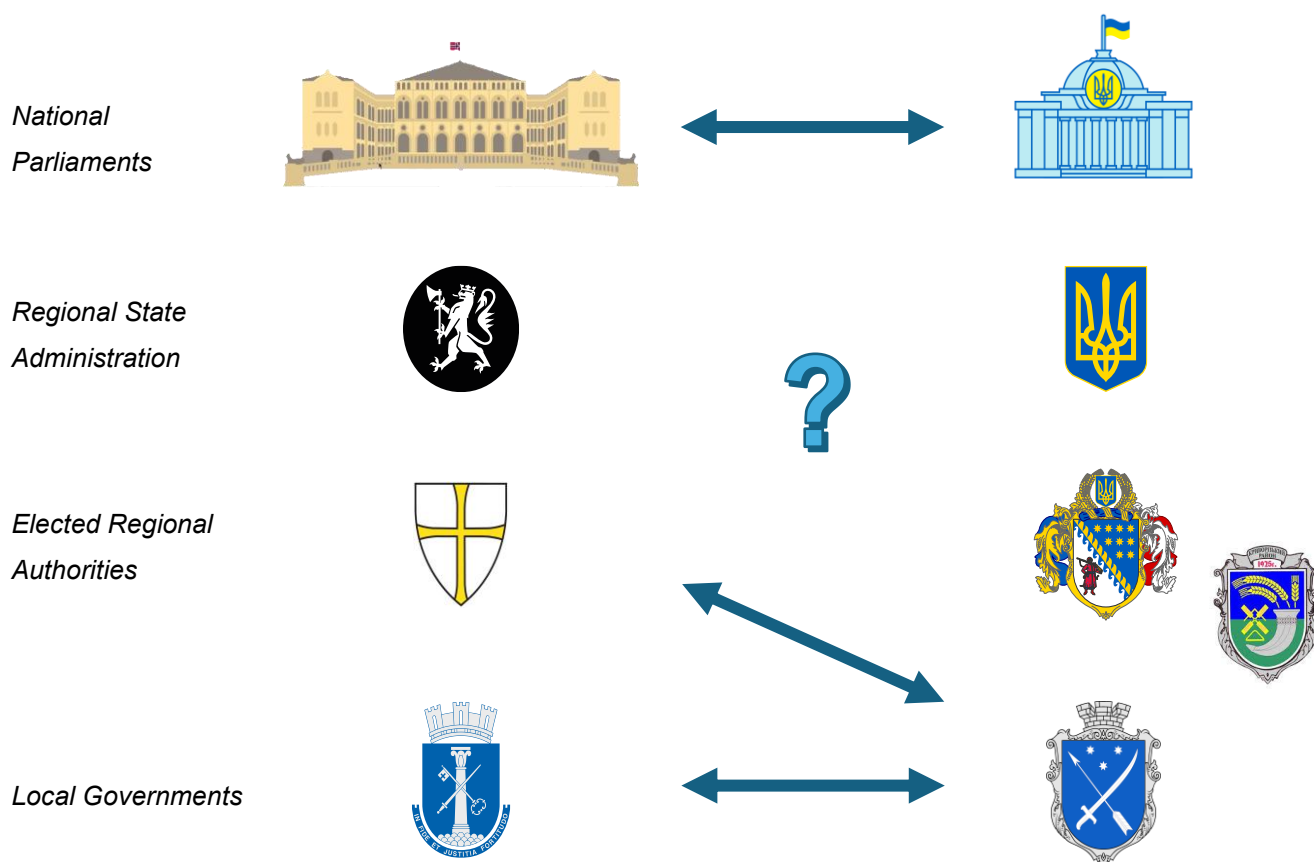
The ongoing war has added an extra layer of complexity. The introduction of Regional Military Administrations, while necessary for security and continuity, has blurred the lines between civil and military governance and delayed some aspects of reform.

To address these challenges, the Ukraine Plan and recommendations from the Council of Europe propose a series of solutions. Central to these are the completion of decentralization reforms, ensuring a clearer division of responsibilities between central, regional, subregional, and local authorities. The establishment of independent executive bodies for oblast and rayon councils is a key priority, as it would allow elected representatives to exercise real authority and improve accountability.

Another major reform is the transition from the current governor-based system to a modern prefect model. Prefects would act as state representatives responsible for legality control and coordination of state services, without interfering in the executive functions of elected councils. This change aims to eliminate duplication, reduce conflicts, and strengthen the principle of subsidiarity.

Opportunities for Cooperation on the Regional Level

Cooperation between Norwegian and Ukrainian authorities is already well established at the national level, with active engagement between the parliaments of the two countries.² At the local level, collaboration has grown steadily, and several Norwegian local governments have signed agreements with Ukrainian local governments.³



The coat of arms is for illustration purposes only and does not necessarily reflect existing cooperation agreements.

²https://www.stortinget.no/globalassets/pdf/diverse/memorandum_ukraina_a4_engelsk-og-ukrainsk.pdf

³<https://www.ks.no/fagomrader/ks-internasjonalt/samarbeid-med-ukrainske-kommuner/norske-samarbeidspartnere-i-ukraina/>

Cooperation between regional authorities in Norway and Ukraine is currently not well developed. There are few established institutional partnerships at this level, and experiences are limited compared to cooperation at the national and local levels.⁴ Therefore, at the conclusion of this report, we will outline four possible cooperation constellations that could form the basis for future collaboration between regional authorities in the two countries.

Model 1 — County Council ↔ Hromada (Local Government)

A relevant cooperation constellation is between Norwegian county councils and Ukrainian local governments, preferably regional centres. KS has so far recommended county-council-to-local-government cooperation.

Ukrainian local governments deliver many services that Norwegian county councils also hold responsibility for or interact with—creating natural peer-to-peer exchange of experience and capacity building related to specific tasks and services. Typical themes include upper secondary education; public transport; youth participation; culture and heritage; climate and environmental action; and inclusive public health promotion.

Model 2 — County Council ↔ *Oblasna Rada* (and *Rayonna Rada*)

Another relevant cooperation constellation could be cooperation between elected bodies at the regional level. The elected regional bodies in Norway (county councils) and Ukraine (*oblasna rada*, optionally *rayonna rada*) share symmetrical functions as policy-setting and oversight institutions. While executive capacity differs, both sides develop strategies, manage/regulate regional assets and institutions, and represent subnational interests. This model creates a peer-to-peer track between elected regional authorities, focusing on governance, strategy, and oversight.

Norwegian county councils have good experience with international work and application processes within various European funding mechanisms. Such expertise

⁴ In July 2025, Akershus County Council entered into a cooperation agreement with the local government in Poltava, an oblast centre in Ukraine. This is significant because it represents the first example of a Norwegian county council partnering with a Ukrainian local government.

will be very useful for both local governments and elected bodies at the regional level in Ukraine, when they apply for funding for various projects.

Model 3 — Cooperation Between Regional State Administrations

This model focuses on collaboration between the state-appointed regional authorities: the County Governors in Norway and the Regional State Administrations (or Regional Military Administrations, RMAs) in Ukraine. These institutions serve as the central government's representatives at the regional level and play a crucial role in ensuring the implementation of national policies, legal supervision, crisis management, and the coordination of state services.

Through such a partnership, both countries can exchange experiences on how to monitor the legality of decisions made by local and regional governments, manage administrative appeals, and safeguard the rule of law. The cooperation also provides an opportunity to share approaches to coordinating and implementing national reforms and sectoral policies, while ensuring policy coherence across regions.

Joint activities may include training and knowledge exchange on emergency preparedness and crisis response, which is particularly relevant given Ukraine's current security challenges.

Model 4 — Dual-Structure Cooperation (Elected Bodies + State Repr.)

It may also be possible to consider a dual-structure cooperation constellation between regional authorities in Norway and Ukraine. For instance, cooperation involving Norwegian county councils and county governors on one side, and Ukrainian oblast/rayon councils and governors/military administrations on the other, could create a powerful platform for knowledge exchange.

Such collaboration would mirror the dual structure of governance in both countries—elected bodies and state representatives—and allow for targeted experience-sharing on issues of democratic accountability and regional development.

This approach aligns closely with Ukraine's reform agenda as outlined in Chapter 9 of the Ukraine Plan, which is a step in the direction of clarifying the roles of state

representatives and elected bodies at the regional level, similar to the Norwegian model. By engaging in institutional cooperation, Norwegian regional authorities can offer practical insights into how to balance state oversight with local autonomy, how to structure intergovernmental relations, and how to ensure democratic legitimacy in regional governance. Such collaboration would not only strengthen bilateral ties but also support Ukraine's integration into European governance standards.

Conclusion

This report has explored the key aspects of regional governance in Norway and Ukraine, drawing on presentations and discussions from the recent webinar. We have briefly examined the legal frameworks and institutional contexts that shape local and regional authorities in both countries, and compared the roles and responsibilities of elected bodies and state administrations. Special attention has been given to the ongoing reform process in Ukraine, including the challenges and opportunities associated with decentralization, the division of powers, and the development of new models for regional governance.

The report has also outlined several possible forms of cooperation between Norwegian and Ukrainian authorities at the regional level. These include partnerships between county councils and local governments, collaboration between elected regional bodies, and joint initiatives involving both elected authorities and state representatives. Each model offers unique opportunities for mutual learning, capacity building, and the exchange of best practices.

Institutional cooperation between Norwegian and Ukrainian authorities is not only valuable for supporting reform and development in Ukraine—it also provides important learning opportunities for both sides. By working together, regional and local governments, as well as state administrations, can share experiences, address common challenges, and develop innovative solutions to complex governance issues. Such collaboration strengthens democratic institutions, improves public service delivery, and fosters resilience in the face of crisis.

In a time of profound change and uncertainty, building strong partnerships across borders is more important than ever. The experiences and insights gained through institutional cooperation will contribute to the ongoing development of effective, transparent, and accountable governance in both Norway and Ukraine. We look forward to continued collaboration and shared progress in the years to come.