

ICPS newsletter

Achievements and prospects of the Ukrainian democracy

During 2–3 February 2003, the Wilton Park Centre (Great Britain) hosted an international conference titled “Ukraine: the future”, where the Director of the International Centre for Policy Studies Vira Naniwska delivered a presentation on “How successful has Ukraine been in developing the democratic process? A view from within”. Below are the key provisions of this speech

Misperception of the transformation process in Ukraine

Ukraine has managed to acquire an appalling reputation in the eyes of the international community, nothing seems right in Ukraine and each misdemeanour has been much publicized. But the most important thing about Ukraine really has not been noticed: the fact that Ukraine is undergoing an uprooting process of transformation. And as with any process of change, Ukrainian transformation can only be assessed against its own previous condition. In times of transformation it is the success of the process of transformation that defines the value of the whole society.

Unfortunately international development experts do not seem to be using this criterion of benchmarks for change to evaluate country performance. Instead, they evaluate specific political events, decisions or even individuals, which forces them to take sides in the never-ending struggle for power. Ranking countries by the degree to which they have achieved democracy is like a nightmare of a school where students of all “levels of development” or even “ages” are evaluated against the same criteria without mentioning which year they are in. This approach to evaluation creates

a distorted image of the country in question and does not help to understand transformation and ways to support it.

Since becoming independent in 1991 Ukraine has managed to travel a road, on which some of developed democracies have spent centuries. By now Ukraine has all the key attributes of a democratic society, but all of these political achievements are not enough for changes in the daily life of people. What we see now is the distance between where we are today and where we want to go, and it is very frustrating because we want to see this future ideal made reality now. What we can see from within is only corporate or individuals’ behaviours, and we despair of their inadequacy and do not see how they can be changed. It is very difficult to realise from within that personalities and corporate behaviour is determined to a very high degree by the institutional framework of which they are a part. Behaviour depends on incentives, organizational patterns and skills.

We have seen that the progress of democratisation in Ukraine is assessed by the number of violations of democratic rights and by how the social environment is perceived. Neither of these two criteria is legitimate. Even in “better worlds” where democracy has existed for centuries, citizens are still not satisfied

with the level of democracy; they criticize their government, the political system (in Sweden over 60% of the population are negative about their political system), support the opposition and fight for their rights. These actions force their governments to change for the better and lead to fuller implementation of citizens’ fundamental rights. Nor are the developed democracies protected from violations, be they the same or of different types—racism and corruption in western countries, administrative interventions and corruption in the post-Soviet countries. What puts our countries in different democracy leagues is the maturity of those democratic social institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, which deal with these violations.

The challenge is to create all the necessary democratic societal institutions

The challenge for Ukraine is to create all the needed social institutions which means to create new structures, procedures, standards and skills, which would fully implement the democratic principle by replacing the old equivalents. There are only two ways of doing it: either reinvent democracy through long years of repeating election cycles, because only suffering through the frustrations of elections as a voter or a politician can we learn what democracy is all about, or else take the fast track: learn from those who have done it already, which is only possible through international technical assistance.

The capabilities which democratic Governments need in order to be effective:

- To set and maintain priorities among the many conflicting demands made upon them so that they are not overwhelmed and bankrupted;

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- To coordinate conflicting objectives into a coherent whole;
- To be able to impose losses on powerful groups;
- To ensure policy stability so that policies have time to work;

A Government with such capabilities is democratic—it recognizes the legitimacy of differing societal interests—and effective—it is able to withstand all the conflicting pressures and still hold on to the national strategic interest.

The Government needs new public policy skills

A post-totalitarian government could not possibly have such skills. Totalitarian government machinery was equipped exclusively for the hierarchical implementation of the interests of the one group which was in power. Any public competition, political or economic, was made illegal by force.

The establishment of a democratic constitution brought different competing interest groups to the public political scene. The active presence of new legitimate players competing for resources poses a new challenge for the Government: it cannot operate in the old vertical “command-administrative” mode with any hope of success. Numerous new political players demand to be considered and consulted with.

The Government either develops new public policy skills which were unthinkable in Soviet times or it fails, incapable of managing the chaos of newly-unleashed competition unrestricted by checks and balances which have not yet been created. Lack of democratic institutions, regulations and skills in the Government is bound in the end to make it slide back to the rule of a “strong hand at the helm”. And the public supports it, as people are tired of the chaos of unpredictable transformation.

As we all know, the change in the political system which legitimised political and economic competition did not automatically bring institutional reforms in the post-

Soviet non-accession countries. Governmental and political institutions – their structure, procedures, standards and skills – were not purposefully transformed. Neither did the democratic reforms in Ukraine envisage new courses at Universities teaching policy analysis, or public policy; there were no Technical Assistance projects creating a new capability to manage public communications. Even the concept of communication strategy as an open public process of lobbying a policy decision has not been introduced.

No wonder that instead of policy analysis, post-soviet politicians are using the services of Russian political “technicians” of the old Soviet KGB school, skilled in the most sophisticated methods of undercover war. In this paradigm “public policy” is understood as “manipulation of public opinion”.

Changes can be endured if they are understood

The European Commission financially supports the governments of EU and Candidate States in holding public awareness campaigns. Each reformist decision made by the EU or CEE government has to be clearly understood and supported by the country’s citizens.

In the case of Ukraine, until recently and with some donors to this day, policy studies concerning reform decisions are formally labelled “confidential”. These agencies obviously believe that the Government, once it hears the right advice, would just go ahead and implement it, that they do not have to go to Parliament, they are not under pressure from powerful groups who will bear losses from the implementation of this decision. On the other hand projects meant to support democracy-building would not be allowed to be anywhere close to the policy issues the government is struggling to resolve.

The difference in attitude to Accession countries on the one hand and Ukraine on the other is shocking: in accession countries their incapacities are called needs and helped to be resolved, in

Ukraine our incapacities are invariably called the lack of political will.

Except for the very early stage of privatization there were no initiatives towards raising public awareness and understanding of reforms. Government did not have the experience to see the need to include such objective into their programs. Both factors—lack of national government capacity and no support from the international donor community—led to psychological chaos, the emergence of negative social consequences and the formation of wrong public perceptions of the transformation process in Ukraine.

Conclusions

Ukraine is implementing a consistent democratisation program by encouraging the legitimisation of various societal groups of interest. These transformations have encountered resistance and conflicts of interest, which are legitimate reactions indicating that changes are indeed unfolding, not that they are absent.

Relapses into authoritarian mode, accompanied with erratic changes in government orientation, show that the process of accomplishing a democratic balance is emerging. Democratic development in Ukraine is irrevocable. Self-identification of interest groups, and competition between them, are central to transformation, with public policy as its tool.

Strong conflicting positions of parliament, government, opposition and NGOs, is the proper route towards a democratic society. Donors should not be engaged in pitting them against each other beyond the level indispensable for political competition.

An accelerated democratisation process depends heavily on technical assistance aimed at the institutionalisation of everyday democracy, and building up the capacity for political decision-making in a new environment where ruthless political competition is legitimate.

The new methodology of Development Assistance for building a democratic society must be elaborated taking into account the EU countries’ experience. ■