

# ICPS newsletter<sup>®</sup>

## “Our politicians don’t see the future— or how it differs from the past”

*One of the main reasons for the frequent political crises in Ukrainian society is the absence of a proper elite in the country. But is there not an inherent contradiction between the concept of democracy and the idea of an elite? In Ukraine today, the concept of an elite is closely related to that of a privileged class, making it difficult for a proper elite to be recognized. What role an elite might play in a modern, democratic society and what conditions are needed for a responsible political class to emerge in Ukraine are two questions tackled by ICPS Director Volodymyr Nikitin in a recent interview with Expert magazine*

**Expert:** Some people say that the process of democratization, as a mechanism for fully engaging citizens in the running of their countries, and the establishment of an elite are mutually exclusive. To what extent is an elite really needed at this stage in history?

**Volodymyr Nikitin:** In the West, the word “elite” is avoided at public hearings, as a concept that belongs to the past. It is generally used only in relation to countries that are still developing, including Ukraine. In EU countries, the elite long ago formed itself and not much in the way of upheaval is anticipated in its circles. That is why European politicians can quietly discuss democracy and the concept of a society of equal opportunities.

First, it’s important to distinguish between an elite and privileged individuals. In Ukraine, these concepts have been blurred: the elite are seen as those who have power and a commensurate range of privileges—fancy houses, stores and schools. I understand “elite” as meaning something else. An elite is not those who have power, and even less those who have privileges. It is those who are responsible for the program of transforming society, who are responsible for the development and preservation of the nation. How did a simple monk like Serhiy Radonezhskiy manage to have greater authority than even a duke during his time? [*Serhiy Radonezhskiy was a 14th century church- and statesman. Ed.*] By himself providing an example for others to follow and refusing “power and pelf.” But even more importantly, he had a vision of how to build Rus’, which means that he was able to formulate principles and values for the country.

To be part of the elite is to carry out a public function, not to depend on a specific group of people who are in power. Ukrainian politicians do not fully constitute an elite, because they lack a sense of responsibility. Only those who take upon themselves responsibility for the development of their society and who are capable of demonstrating this responsibility can gain the kind of authority that will allow them to influence public awareness.

**E:** What do you mean by “taking on responsibility”? By what mechanism can responsibility be established and taken on?

**VN:** In the first place, it means acting on the basis of principles and not circumstances. When there was a status-based concept of elite and the nobility took on this role, there was a clear mechanism for verifying whether a person lived by specific principles or not. There was a concept of honor and everything was decided by duels. Principles are formed based on the emergence of new models of behavior in a society. In Ukraine today, you can’t name a single leader who is prepared to live according to any principles that can be put into action.

**E:** Perhaps they are forming new models of behavior at this very time...

**VN:** It’s one or the other: either you have principles, or you don’t. Principles are established in groups. Individuality is only a reflection of group behavior. In time, there appears a group of people who begin to understand why they are not satisfied and begin to present their own vision of how society should work. Eventually, these principles are adopted more widely in the society.

**E:** In a modern society, is this mostly the group that is in power?

**VN:** Not necessarily. This group can contain people from various walks of life. Society is not unitary—its structure shifts and an elite might appear, say, among groups of younger people or, like the US in the Sixties, when a group of people appeared who proposed new forms of communal life. They never came to power, but they had an impact on society.

In Ukraine, there are probably already some groups emerging who behave somehow differently. The main thing is to notice these groups. In the modern information society, they don’t even have to be territorial in nature. We live in an on-line society and role models for behavior come from the mass media and movies. For instance, Hollywood always acts in conjunction with US national interests and the values of the American people.

**E:** If we live in the information age and our society is under the influence of the culture of more advanced countries, while these groups form without any territorial ties, then perhaps the notion of a national elite is not necessary and it doesn’t play that important a role?

**VN:** There are some who believe in the theory that the world contains only a few elites: a European one, an American and an Arabic one. These elites are concentrated in the most developed countries in these regions and influence all other states. Supporters of this theory claim that, when other countries are information societies, including Ukraine, there is little chance of a new elite appearing. Since there are no groups of people who might propose a social development program that matches global dimensions, those states are little more than the interstices of external interests. I don’t exactly subscribe to this point-of-view. I think that Ukraine is far from hopeless.

Society develops on three levels. At the lowest level is the buzz of ordinary life: people are unhappy with a situation and they want

privileges and freedom. In Ukraine, you see not just the energy of human movement, but, with every passing year, more and more people who clearly understand how they would like to live. At the lowest level, this energy is not organized, and if it is not given some shape, then you end up with the same old "Russian rebellion, raging and ruthless." By form, I mean the social organization of people. It gets set in motion at the level of ideas. And in Ukraine, so far, nothing has appeared: the Church is not producing such ideas and there are no people with authority sufficient to the task of rebuilding this society. And even if some individuals are bringing forth new ideas, those who know of them can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

In order to create and carry through the project of the Ukrainian state, people need to be trained. Before our team, led by philosopher and teacher Grigoriy Shchedrovyt'skiy, began to work on establishing the Togliatti Academy [*in 2000–2005, the author worked as head of the Department of the Humanities at the International Academy of Business and Banking in Togliatti, Russia. Ed.*], we traveled around the country, meeting with governors, politicians and other leaders with whom we discussed possible reforms. It was then that we understood that these people were hopeless—that they were completely incapable of changing anything within the government bureaucracy. We came to a simple conclusion: we needed to train a new generation of people who would be able to take on responsibility for carrying out reforms and would train others who could do this. That's why we decided to focus on the system of education.

**E:** Do you mean that a political elite cannot ensure a breakthrough in development?

**VN:** The post-soviet elite cannot be responsible for breakthrough reforms. Our basic problem lies in the fact that we have not separated the past (soviet) from the new (democratic). The country's leaders just don't see this temporary border and they still operate according to the soviet system of management. When I lecture to state officials about the difference between soviet methods of managing and democratic methods, I can see that this is news to them. The same is true at the city level, at the oblast level, at the national level.

At the moment, we still don't have new forms of social organization—or, if they are there, no one knows about them. There are no new approaches to education and there is no new understanding of the role of the individual within society. All of Ukraine is that same soviet social security project, only under new circumstances. The same soviet stereotypes still operate, even in the formulation of a

national idea. Because what the dissidents and nationalists were working on, although it was aimed against the soviet reality, was developed within the soviet framework and according to soviet rules. It has served its purpose. In the context of an independent state, though, it is destructive.

We now have a country that has to be built anew. The concept of this country should be consolidated by its citizenry and be based on their overall heritage, and not on a division of this heritage into Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian. And if we share this heritage with the Russians, there's nothing especially terrible about that. We won't become less independent as a result, but we will definitely be the richer for it.

**E:** So you're saying that, so far, we've been recreating a power elite inside a closed circle...

**VN:** Until now, we have essentially been recreating the soviet nomenclature—and it doesn't much matter what you call it. Ukraine's current political elite has no vision of the future. Franklin Roosevelt, for instance, had his own sense of direction. After leading the country out of the hole it found itself in during the Great Depression of the 1930s, he was able to rebuild America and show the country where it was going. At the same time, Hollywood began to illustrate the American Dream. Our politicians don't see the future and don't understand how it differs from the past. Many of them don't have the most basic democratic skills. But the main thing is that they do not feel responsible to anyone and they don't want to take any responsibility on themselves, not even before their own electorates.

**E:** In forming a new elite, should we use foreign examples as a basis? For instance, Oleh Rybachuk, the former Deputy Premier for European integration in the Tymoshenko Cabinet, wanted his team to consist exclusively of graduates from western schools.

**VN:** That's completely wrong. We've already gone through that. The western approach to education suits the West. In our situation, it doesn't work. When we were working on the Togliatti Academy of Administration, we sent our first seniors to study in the US. But when they came back, we were unable to hire any of them to work for us. The way things are here, they were unable to carry out any of their assignments. They ceased to be able to understand reality here and began to rely on leverage that we simply don't have, although it does work over there. We need a system of professional development that will make use of western experience but will be built on our own models, on our people, and on those occasional intermediaries who know both these worlds.

**E:** So you consider Ukraine far from hopeless and believe there's a chance that individuals will emerge who will take responsibility for the country's development. What conditions are needed for that to happen?

**VN:** I've already said what the first condition is: activism among the masses. And that we have already brilliantly seen in Ukraine. Then, you need an environment where there is enough freedom for individual and group talent to express itself. Freedom, which is different from being free (maybe the free kozak will toss the duchess overboard, and maybe he won't; it's up to him), is a contract of mutual limitations, that is, you can establish rules by which you all agree to live. Ukraine is currently "free" of this kind of rules, yet they need to be established. What we see happening in our political process right now is like that free kozak. Yet these political processes are completely normal—provided that, in the end, a system of limitations is adopted and the rules of the game are made clear through the necessary legislation. But if this doesn't happen, then what we have is no more than a political circus.

**E:** What will this state-building start with?

**VN:** We want to get into the European Union, but without bothering to establish European values. We give the impression that we want to go there in order to remove responsibility for our own future. Because it means that others will make decisions for us, and those decisions will be better. But the EU won't take us in until we learn to take responsibility for our own territory. Ukraine is like a patchwork quilt that still needs to be completely stitched together. The question is, how to do this: on the basis of a unitary country or on the basis of one in which the regions want to live together. If the latter, then we need to let them have the opportunity to indicate where their interests lie. So far, we've been following a policy of equalizing the oblasts. We are afraid of federalism, as we are not prepared for the idea that every region could have its own development strategy.

I think that, in the end, the process will start at the bottom, from the cities and the regions. Ukraine differs from other post-soviet countries in that no interest group is able to subordinate another. As long as this equilibrium is maintained, so that Rinat Akhmetov can't gobble up Ihor Kolomoisky, or the President the Verkhovna Rada, then the possibility for establishing an open society and development remains. But as soon as someone swallows someone else and begins to run everything, all chances will be lost. ■

*The complete text of the interview can be found at <http://www.expert.ua/articles/8/0/3858/> (in Russian). For additional information, you can contact Mr. Nikitin by phone at (380-44) 484-4400 or via e-mail at [vnikitin@icps.kiev.ua](mailto:vnikitin@icps.kiev.ua).*

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