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Can elections be harmful to democracy?

It has been said that young leaders are the foot soldiers of democracy, and the grassroots campaign that swelled up during Orange Revolution is proof that Ukraine is no exception. Still, five years later, the Orange Revolution's promise of reform has yet to be fulfilled. This is in large part due to a lack of leadership not only at the top of the government machine, but throughout the system. Still, even the best reform strategy will fail without strong leaders to promote and undertake it. On 23 September, young leaders of Ukraine met at the International Centre for Policy Studies, at a discussion panel held jointly with the British Council, to hear the Right Honorable Stephen Byers speak about the opportunities and pitfalls of the democratic process and to witness the launch of the 2010 John Smith Memorial Trust Fellowship Program

As part of the Program launch, Mr. Byers, a former British Labor Minister and current Chairman of the Board of the Yalta European Strategy, addressed a group of young Ukrainian leaders on the opportunities and pitfalls of the democratic process, in both mature and developing democracies. He considered the question, "Can elections be harmful to democracy?"

In the short term, Mr. Byers argued, elections can sometimes do more harm than good to the democratic process. Indeed, he warned against equating the simple holding of elections with true democracy. Citing ICPS's September policy brief on Ukraine's upcoming presidential election, he stated, "Democracy is about more than free elections, and Ukrainians—both ordinary citizens and political leaders—are learning this the hard way."

When centered on personalities rather than on ideas, elections fail to stimulate the kind of debate necessary to move a country forward. If slogans are not underpinned by values, a vote can needlessly divide people and distract from crucial decisions. Mr. Byers expressed regret that this appeared to be the case in Ukraine now, where political parties were associated with individuals, not principles. He argued that true democracy could not emerge until the country developed a strong, values-based multi-party system.

In the long term, of course, elections are an essential component of any democratic

system. Without them, Mr. Byers pointed out, leaders could not be held accountable and good governance became impossible because the interests of key segments of the population were not taken into account.

Elections are, therefore, an essential, but not a sufficient, condition for democracy. While noting that different cultures could hold equally valid definitions of democracy—playing the devil's advocate, Mr. Byers argued that Russia's "managed democracy" might not be all that different from British democracy, where parliamentary candidates are chosen by a small number of party members—, Mr. Byers argued that the very notion of popular government demands that votes adhere to four basic principles:

1. universal suffrage;
2. equal value of all votes;
3. equal access of candidates to media and other means of spreading their messages;
4. a fair voting process, subject to independent legal challenge.

While these points can seem self-evident, omitting even one can cripple the democratic process and stir up unrest, a fact dramatically demonstrated by the Orange Revolution. The popular "uprising" was triggered by widespread perception that the results of the first and second round of the presidential election had been rigged.

In the same vein, independent expert Ivan Poltavets focused on the rules for political competition in Ukraine, which he

considers unsound. "Ukrainian politicians know how to win elections, but not how to govern," he said, and drew a parallel between the current political situation in Ukraine and that of Weimar Germany, where a perpetual parliamentary crisis led to election fatigue and enabled the Nazis to win through the proportional electoral system. Their main promise? To put an end to the instability.

Balazs Jarabik of Pact Ukraine also emphasized the importance of good governance. He compared Ukraine, which "has democracy but no governance," to Belarus, which "has governance but no democracy," and questioned the conventional wisdom that the former is better than the latter. He also showed how Ukraine's personality-driven politics has led many in the country to see key foreign figures—namely US President Barack Obama—as mere personalities, not as agents of progress or change.

Ever the optimist, Mr. Byers responded to these comments by noting that, while Ukraine's democratic progress was slower than many had hoped, the country was still a young democracy. "When Great Britain was a young democracy, we were chopping people's heads off," he reminded his audience. "By those standards, Ukraine's not doing too badly."

The event also featured the launch of the 2010 John Smith Memorial Trust Fellowship Program, which gives future leaders from across the former Soviet Union an opportunity to study good governance, the rule of law, and human rights with British experts. Such programs are essential to the democratization of Ukraine, as even the best reform strategy will prove fruitless unless there are strong leaders to advocate and implement it. ■

For more information, contact ICPS security and foreign policy expert Sacha Tessier-Stall by phone at (380-44) 484-4400 or via mail at sacha.tessier-stall@icps.kiev.ua.

Whose fate will the Irish referendum decide?

One of the decisive dates in the history of the European Union, 2 October 2009, slipped by virtually unnoticed in Ukraine, while European politicians most likely had had a sleepless night. During the course of 15 hours, 3 million Irish citizens gave their votes for or against the Lisbon Treaty. This is a document whose ratification not only could prove a turning point in the way the European Union is structured, but could also directly affect Ukraine's chances of getting closer to the Union

History shows that a country needn't be strong or influential to stand up to a supra-national union. All that is needed is that its citizens take a clear stand. And this is something the Irish can be proud of.

Having been under British rule for many centuries, the population of the Green Isle is understandably skeptical of the policy of common decision-making and is jealous of its modern-day independence. This is not the first time they have voted against reforms to the European Union: in 2001, Irish voters expressed their disagreement with the Nice Treaty, which they also only approved on a second referendum—and then only after the European Union promised not to challenge Ireland's neutrality.

So why did the Irish vote in favor of the Lisbon Treaty on 2 October? After all, those who campaigned actively against the Treaty have been hollering for all to hear that not a single comma was changed in it. Nor is it likely that an excess of confidence in politicians stood behind the change of heart: Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Brian Cowen and his ruling Fianna Fáil party are at the bottom of the ratings barrel, while the opposition has been pushing for a second rejection. On the other hand, the related public awareness campaign was strong enough to help shape or to even radically affect public opinion.

Does this mean that the "Yes" vote reflected a real understanding of the benefits of the Treaty?

Influential EU politicians had warned many times what the potential consequences would be of a negative vote—not so much for the European Union as for Ireland itself. The financial crisis reinforced this effect. Unemployment of 12.6% has a bigger

impact on voters than the EUR 1.84 minimum hourly wage that the anti-Lisbon movement called The Cóir claims will threaten Irish workers (the current minimum is EUR 8.65). After all, it is investment from the European Union that once launched rapid economic growth in a stagnating Irish economy, so the prospects of political isolation are hardly attractive under the current circumstances.

Still, the question arises whether the heated debate, flyers, round-tables and money that were spent to hold the two referenda were worth the final result. With Czech President Vaclav Klaus also holding off signing the Treaty, together with his Polish counterpart, the Irish referendum has not been the final word on the issue of institutional reform of the European Union.

The Lisbon Treaty and Kyiv's hopes

Lisbon Treaty ratification at the Union level would be a good sign for Ukraine, as it provides instruments for enhancing the absorption capacity of the EU (according to the current Nice Treaty the European Union can accommodate up to 28 members).

Moreover, it expands the power of the European Parliament, which could well result in financial aid on top of the annual support Ukraine receives from the EU. This is because the European Parliament is responsible for drawing up the Budget item on spending on partner countries. And while currently its function is more consultative, with the Lisbon Treaty in place, the Parliament will have the final word on approving expenditures within its purview. Given that Polish MP Jerzy Busek, who looks favorably on Ukraine, will be the President of the Parliament until January

Expanding the Energy Community: What does this mean for Ukraine?

The international conference "The Enlargement of the Energy Community: What's in it for Ukraine?" will take place at the Receptions House (22, Hrushevskogo Street) on 8th October from 8:30 to 17:00. The event is organized by the International Centre for Policy Studies and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in cooperation with the Energy Community Secretariat (Vienna).

This conference will be the first public event to unpack the issue of Ukraine's membership in the Energy Community*. The conference will bring together various energy-sector stakeholders, including representatives of the Government of Ukraine and business, the European Union and Energy Community Secretariat. The participants will be discussing the prospects of membership for Ukraine's energy sector, new investment opportunities and steps to be taken by the Government of Ukraine. The press is invited to attend the conference throughout the whole event.

The exclusive press-conference will take place after the conference and will be attended by Deputy Prime-Minister of Ukraine Hryhoriy Nemyria and Director of the Energy Community Secretariat Slavtcho Neykov. The press conference will start at 17:00.

Journalists can register for the press-conference by 15:00 October 7th, 2009 at +380 44 484 44 10 or via e-mail: anna.karnaukh@icps.kiev.ua, contact person Anna Karnaukh, ICPS Public Events Manager.

2012, who looks favorably on Ukraine, a ratified Lisbon Treaty could be of great benefit to Ukraine financially, at least in the short term. ■

For more information, contact ICPS expert on EU integration issues Kateryna Zarembo by phone at (380-44) 484-4400 or via mail at kzarembo@icps.kiev.ua.

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icps newsletter editor: Olga Lvova (olvova@icps.kiev.ua)
Phone: (380-44) 484-4400. Fax: (380-44) 484-4402
English text editor: L.A. Wolanskyj
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Address: vul. Pymonenka 13A, Kyiv, Ukraine 04050
Web-site: <http://www.icps.com.ua/eng/>