

January 18, 2011

Ukraine: Comprehensive Partnership for a Real Democracy

Kseniya Oksamytna

Article at a glance

- Despite the promise of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the country's democratic government has returned to its old corrupt ways.
- Young people can reverse this process by taking a stronger interest in democracy and politics.
- Some of the possible interventions that would lead to a more active youth in Ukraine include: engaging youth groups in policy, strengthening educational programs involving debate and citizenship, allowing student councils at universities a measure of independence to improve leadership skills, and widening the available pool of government internships, both in Ukraine and internationally.



This article is a 2010 CIPE International Youth Essay Competition third place winner in the category of democracy that delivers.

To comment on this article, visit the CIPE Development Blog: www.cipe.org/blog.



Center for International Private Enterprise

1155 15th Street, NW | Suite 700 | Washington, DC 20005

ph: (202) 721-9200 | fax: (202) 721-9250 | www.cipe.org | cipe@cipe.org

Introduction

The Orange Revolution was a wonderful example of democratic transition: a non-violent protest against a rigged election, which brought to power a seemingly people-focused and pro-Western president. Although all social groups took part in the revolution, students and young professionals of Ukraine's fledgling middle class formed its core. For politically passive Ukrainians, it looked like the nation's great awakening and the beginning of a new era.

Five years later, the mood is one of indifference and disenchantment. The "orange government" has turned out to be as corrupt and incompetent as its predecessors. It should therefore hardly elicit surprise that Victor Yanukovich, the politician with a criminal past and was accused of stealing the 2004 election, was elected president in winter 2010. Voter turnout in the second and decisive round was the lowest in Ukrainian history.¹

Moreover, youth participation has fallen dramatically. I myself did not vote in the last election, although I was on the streets during the rainy autumn of 2004 protesting against lawlessness and power-grabbing. At some point, we lost the momentum for engaging young people in the governance of the country. All subsequent generations of politicians will be faced with the same question: how to win back the hearts and minds of Ukrainian youth.

The Vicious Circle

According to *The Economist's* 2008 Democracy Index, Ukraine scores impressively high on electoral pluralism (9.58 out of 10) and on civil liberties (almost 8), yet has a dismal record on government functioning (5.36), political participation (5.56), and political culture (6.25).² In other words, in Ukraine there are no structural impediments to meaningful participation in institutions of democracy, yet the inefficiency of elected officials on the one hand and the apathy of

citizens on the other have created a vicious circle of mistrust and cynicism. As *The Economist* rightly observed in the midst of the 2010 presidential race, "Ukraine's free (and frequent) elections are providing neither good governance nor stability."³

Political culture is precisely Ukraine's main problem. Party membership is estimated to be lower than one percent of the voting-age population.⁴ Although several initiatives to address the unsettling phenomenon have been launched, the degree of voter ignorance is alarming.⁵ The situation is further aggravated by the virtual absence of ideological differences among parties. While ideological consensus is increasingly observed in mature democracies as well, scant interest in party politics in Ukraine is a dangerous hangover from Soviet times, when citizens could vote for only one party – the Communists – in pro forma elections. The very notion of ideology has been discredited by the Soviet regime, and discussions of Marxism, communism, and other features of socialism are still taboo in mainstream politics. Until this taboo is broken, ideas from across the entire political spectrum cannot be debated freely.

As a result, most Ukrainian parties advocate rather similar, internally inconsistent sets of policies: cutting taxes while increasing public spending; liberalizing trade yet supporting national champions; and mending relations with Russia while integrating with Europe. The Ukrainian public still does not understand that policy and geopolitical choices must be prioritized and that democratic politics is about making these choices collectively.

In such a situation, parties rely on charismatic and often populist leaders for electoral success. Former German ambassador Dietmar Studemann called this "personality factor" a fundamental defect of Ukrainian politics. Its superiority over ideological platforms has led him to argue that political parties in the proper meaning of the word do not yet exist in Ukraine.⁶

While studying in Europe, I was amazed at how often politics came up in my classmates' Facebook statuses and how many of them were active in organizations like Young Fabians⁷ or Conservative Future.⁸ Quite to the contrary, politics is conspicuously absent from interpersonal conversations among young Ukrainians. Parents also do little to socialize young adults into their roles in the political process. As a result, politics is seen as too distant and too corrupt by ordinary Ukrainians.

These perceptions are not groundless. A unique phenomenon in post-Soviet countries is the emergence of the so-called "industrial-financial groups" that unite powerful regional business interests. While they behave like lobbies, they throw much more weight around and have representatives in government and parliament. As a result of conflicting interests among such groups, constant political infighting is a norm of Ukrainian political life.

Rather than trying to see through the complex web of power relations, Ukrainians blame the government for all ills. For instance, approval ratings of the outgoing Tymoshenko government nosedived on the back of the 2008 economic crisis. Few took the trouble to find out that the contraction had been caused by the vagaries of global commodity markets, namely by the 30 percent fall in the price of steel, Ukraine's main export.⁹ In reality, Tymoshenko was cunning enough to win "an International Monetary Fund bail-out without fulfilling the fund's demands to raise gas prices and cut public spending."¹⁰ Thus, Ukrainians suffer from reluctance and from an inability to see the bigger picture and evaluate politicians' performance carefully and objectively. There is a clear and consistent need to raise political culture in the Ukrainian society.

Encouraging Youth Participation

Engaging youth in public life in general and political life in particular is the key to raising political culture and building democracy that delivers. Some of the solutions presented here are

youth-led, while others require action on the part of national or international organizations.

Engaging Youth Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Democracy Building

Ukraine has a strong network of youth NGOs. The Kyiv branch of AEGEE, the European Students' Forum, is among the most active in Europe. I am a member of the local branch of the European Youth Parliament. Most NGOs, however, shy away from politics, out of fear of political pressure or perhaps because the concept is too polarizing. While it is understandable that youth NGOs are keen on preserving their autonomous, non-political status, there are many ways in which they can advance democracy without becoming politically active. For instance, they could organize roundtables with politicians or draft position papers to better inform youth on political issues of the day.

Strengthening the Independence of Student Councils

Most universities in Ukraine have relatively well-functioning student councils. These councils are associated an advisory body to the Ministry of Education and Science.¹¹ The councils provide students with an opportunity to learn how to manage their affairs in a collective fashion, elect their own leaders, and prepare for political careers. However, the independence of student councils is often constrained by university administrations. Ensuring both *de jure* and *de facto* autonomy of student councils is important for teaching young Ukrainians how to handle bureaucracy and challenge power. Moreover, student councils acting on behalf of their respective student bodies are a guarantee that the Ukrainian educational system meets students' needs. Introducing public oversight of university administrations can strengthen the independence of student councils.

Reversing the Brain Drain

In the immediate aftermath of Ukraine's independence, a large proportion of its scientific elite emigrated. Every year, many talented students go abroad to pursue an education or academic career.

The Open Society Institute recently launched the Returning Scholars Fellowship Program, offering financial support to academics returning to university positions in developing countries after studying abroad.¹² Although I would consider making use of this fellowship myself, I have lost all contact with my university over the years. To reverse the brain drain, universities should stay in touch with their brightest students and graduates studying or doing research abroad. One easy way to do this is by creating alumni networks and societies. This measure will have a positive spillover effect of increasing social capital and weakening incentives to leave in the first place.

Tracking Campaign Promises Online

A very useful website that monitors President Obama's progress in fulfilling his campaign promises exists in the United States.¹³ Such websites should be launched in all countries, tracking promises of elected officials on all levels. For example, the incumbent Ukrainian president ran with an ambitious program of five-year tax holidays for small businesses; cutting value-added and income taxes; public housing for teachers, medical workers, service members, and police officers; free healthcare and introduction of family doctors; monetary incentives for companies that hire young specialists; elections of judges by general suffrage; and professionalization of the army.¹⁴ An obvious question when considering this platform is how the proposed expansion of social programs can be financed given the lowered taxes, yet this has never been queried. It seems that the Ukrainian public does not expect politicians to work towards the realization of their campaign promises. In Ukraine, a website tracking campaign promises could be run by a youth NGO, like the Alliance of Young Political Scientists, Political Technologists and Politicians.

Plurality Voting in Local Elections

The 2004 political reform has introduced party-list proportional representation instead of plurality voting in both parliamentary and local elections. Under this system, independent candidates cannot

nominate themselves for elections – only parties can. Given the extremely low political party membership and lack of ideological differences among them, the reform failed to fulfill its goal of accelerating the transition to an effective multiparty system. As Parliament Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn notes, manufacturing political parties has become a lucrative business for some people: they sell places on party lists to candidates who, in turn, agree to service their sponsors' interests.¹⁵ Thus, young and underprivileged (or truly public-spirited) candidates cannot stand even for local elections. Furthermore, the inability of deputies to form a majority in local councils often stalls their work completely, since as many as 40 tiny but very similar parties compete in small districts.¹⁶ Plurality voting in local elections should be reinstated to streamline governance.

Ban on Paid Political Advertising

Political advertising calls attention to certain parties and candidates yet conveys surprisingly little information about their actual programs. Paid political advertising is banned in many Western liberal democracies, including the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Ireland, Sweden, Malta, Norway, and Denmark, as a discriminatory practice that gives rich and well-established parties an unfair advantage over minority and recently created parties.¹⁷ This practice should be prohibited in Ukraine for three reasons. First, incumbent politicians often embezzle budget money to pay for their re-election campaigns. The expense of political advertisements is one reason this practice goes without challenge. Second, political advertising engenders the power of industrial-financial groups and discourages new, young politicians and parties from entering the race. Finally, advertising creates an ignorant electorate by turning citizens into passive consumers of flashy images and sound bites. The ban would make voters search for information themselves and read campaign manifestos. Also, politicians would have to rely more on old-fashioned campaign tactics, such as touring the country, giving speeches, soliciting support from advocacy groups and trade unions, and making themselves available through the Internet and public hearings. It would help

politicians stay in touch with everyday concerns of their constituencies.

Teaching History of Political Thought

Ukrainian graduates report that they lack knowledge about how the political and party systems are organized; how NGOs function and how to participate in their activities; what taxes are levied on citizens; and how budgets are formed.¹⁸ There is a need to improve competencies in these areas. It should be supplemented by education on major political ideologies from a socio-historical perspective. I coasted through a course on legal studies in high school, but the only thing I remember from those lessons is that parliaments can be either unicameral or bicameral.

Recently, a European Union (EU)-funded project introducing civic education in some schools has been implemented.¹⁹ Yet without understanding cleavages between left and right (and green) on issues such as social justice, redistribution, solidarity, and private property, students' participation in public life will remain formal rather than substantive. This can already be seen in students' opinions about active citizenship. When asked what active citizenship entails, most of them name formal attributes of citizenship, such as defending one's rights and respecting rights of others (89 percent), following the law (78 percent), and honoring national symbols (75 percent). Very few mentioned substantive features of active citizenship, such as participation in self-governance (22 percent), civil disobedience (25 percent), and political party membership (11 percent).²⁰

Educating students about ideologies that have had a considerable impact on the course of world history would, without doubt, ameliorate the situation and spark interest in politics. A practical way of doing so would be to invite representatives of political parties to schools and universities, making sure that every political force has a chance to speak.

Debate as a Tool for Citizen Education

In addition to history of political thought, students have to be knowledgeable about contemporary policy controversies. Introducing debate into high school and university curricula has proved an overwhelming success in many countries, most notably in the United States. Teaching argumentation, public speaking, and critical thinking would make Ukrainian students more informed as citizens and more successful as future politicians. I took part in many international championships myself, which contributed significantly to my personal development.

Topics debated at the 2009 World Universities Debating Championship were whether to ban gambling, whether to allow publication of political opinion polls, whether quotas for domestic players in national football leagues should be introduced, whether the International Criminal Court should prosecute crimes against the democratic process, and whether governments should subsidize private home ownership.²¹ These questions can easily become voting issues in the next elections in western Europe or the United States, but Ukrainians rarely stop and think about them. Debate is a powerful tool for encouraging young people to reflect upon the moral, ethical, and political dilemmas of our times.

Internships at Public Institutions in Ukraine

At the moment, the U.S. Agency for International Development is implementing a rather successful internship program that allows students and graduates to gain work experience at the Ukrainian parliament.²² The number of interns, however, barely exceeds 100 annually and the stipend they receive is puny: EUR 80 a month for full-time interns and EUR 40 for part-time. Before the economic crisis, the cost of living in Kyiv was the same as in Rome or Vienna.²³ In comparison, young Europeans can intern at the European Commission (EC), EC delegations, the European Parliament, various committees and agencies, lobbies and political parties, offices of individual members, and, in most cases, national

parliaments and governments, receiving on average EUR 1,000 a month.

In the Ukraine context, the rationale behind expanding the existing internship program is two-fold: firstly, it is a unique opportunity for young people to get a taste of life in politics and jumpstart a political career; secondly, having young people around might make seasoned politicians less prone to engage in murky schemes out of fear of disclosure.

Not only should the number of interns be increased, but the list of hosting institutions also should be widened to include the Supreme Court of Ukraine, the National Bank, various agencies (such as the State Statistics Committee of Ukraine or National Space Agency), and local governments. Political parties should also offer internships to attract students and recent graduates and establish functional youth wings. This should be accompanied by raising the profile of the internship program. At the moment, only political science students are aware of this opportunity. However, involving students of all specialties, especially technical ones, will weaken the perception of politics as something distant from real life that does not affect everyone. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, citizens' cynical views of politics are the consequence of the monopoly professional politicians hold over the field.²⁴ Furthermore, involving students and young professionals from a wide range of disciplines would allow the government to benefit from their technical expertise. This is the first step towards evidence-based policy.

Internships at European and International Institutions

Ukrainian youth could learn about good governance by interning at European or international institutions. While citizens of all countries are eligible for European Commission and European Parliament traineeships, the number of interns from outside the EU cannot exceed five percent of the intake. Under the existing scenario, Ukrainians

compete for extremely scarce places with highly qualified students from countries worldwide, including the United States, Canada, and Australia. If the EU is truly interested in spreading democracy and stability in its immediate neighborhood, it should introduce a special quota for interns from the Eastern Partnership countries.²⁵

A similar situation exists with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) internships, which are open only to nationals of the alliance's member states. In special cases, citizens of Partnership for Peace (PfP) countries can apply, but their chances of acceptance are slim. Ukrainian youth are consequently unaware of NATO's role in the post-Cold War world, which makes it easy for pro-Russian media to portray NATO as an aggressive bloc threatening Ukraine's security and sovereignty. Few know that NATO assists Ukraine in disaster management²⁶ and finances its research institutes.²⁷ More internships at NATO and EU institutions would promote a more favorable image of these organizations and accelerate Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration.

It is particularly deplorable that Ukrainians cannot intern at international NGOs since they require a work visa. Such visas are granted only if the applicant is to receive a living wage, something rarely offered by NGOs. Visa regulations for interns and hosting institutions should be relaxed.

Free Legal Advice for Youth

Young Ukrainians often fail to defend their rights in court simply because the costs of hiring a lawyer are prohibitively high. This conveys an impression that lawlessness reigns in Ukraine and causes young people to distrust the legal system. Free legal help is available to young people in many developed countries, such as Denmark and Australia. Such advice can be provided by a Ukrainian youth NGOs like the Coordinating Council of Young Lawyers.

Conclusion

Of course, most of the solutions proposed in this essay are not entirely new; they have been tried and tested elsewhere. However, the combination of these tactics can effectively address Ukraine's most pressing problems. The findings should be extrapolated to other post-Soviet countries with caution, since the situation is uniquely different in each country.

Endnotes

- ¹ The Institute of Politics, 'Election 2010: Analysis of Voter Turnout in the Second Round' (in Ukrainian), 2010, viewed on May 16, 2010, <http://polityka.in.ua/info/353.htm>.
- ² *The Economist*, 'Democracy index', October 29, 2008, viewed on May 14, 2010, http://www.economist.com/markets/rankings/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12499352.
- ³ *The Economist*, 'Five years on in Kiev', January 21, 2010, viewed on May 9, 2010, http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=15330489.
- ⁴ V. Sirenko, 'On the imperative mandate and other initiatives of the Ukrainian elite' (in Ukrainian), February, 8, 2008, viewed on June 1, 2010, http://dialogs.org.ua/issue_full.php?m_id=12154.
- ⁵ Examples include the civic initiative "Znaju!" ("I Know!"), conducted before the 2006 parliamentary elections, and the "New Citizen" campaign conducted before and after the 2010 presidential elections under the slogans "I'm hiring a president" and "Ask the newly elected president."
- ⁶ *Kyiv Post*, 'Former German Ambassador Studemann views superiority of personality factor as fundamental defect of Ukrainian politics', December 22, 2009, viewed on May 7, 2010, <http://www.kyivpost.com/news/politics/detail/55635>.
- ⁷ The under-31s section of the Fabian Society, Britain's Labor think-tank.
- ⁸ The movement for the under-30s who are members of the UK's Conservative Party.
- ⁹ K. Oksamytna, 'Eastern Promises: Ukraine and the IMF's Costly Assistance', Unpublished MA thesis, City University London, May 2009.
- ¹⁰ *The Economist*, 'Five years on in Kiev'.
- ¹¹ Web-portal of Ukrainian Government, 'Constituent conference of All-Ukrainian Student Council under Ministry of Education and Science held in Kyiv', May 30, 2005, viewed on June 2, 2010, http://www.kmu.gov.ua/control/en/publish/article?art_id=17291258&cat_id=32598.
- ¹² Open Society Institute, 'Returning Scholars Fellowship Program', 2010, viewed on June 5, 2010, <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/hesp/focus/afp/grants/rsfp>.
- ¹³ The website 'PolitiFact' is run by the St. Petersburg Times newspaper based in Florida. It aims to "sort out the truth in politics" and has won the Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the 2008 election. See 'The Obameter: Tracking Obama's Campaign Promises', viewed on April 9, 2010, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/promises>.
- ¹⁴ V. Yanukovich, 'Ukraine for the people', October 26, 2009, viewed on June 2, 2010, http://www.president.gov.ua/docs/udl_ua.pdf.
- ¹⁵ Official website of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 'Parliamentary hearings on reforming the legislation on local elections in the interests of local communities' (in Ukrainian), May 12, 2010, viewed on June 6, 2010, http://www.rada.gov.ua/zakon/new/par_sl/sl120510.htm.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ E. Machet, 'Working Group 2: Political Advertising', 16th Meeting of the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities, Ljubljana, October 24-25, 2002, viewed on June 6, 2010, www.epra.org/content/english/press/papers/EPRA200209.doc.
- ¹⁸ Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 'Contemporaries of independent Ukraine: ideas, interests, and citizenship. Nationwide survey of 11th-graders' (in Ukrainian), December 10, 2008, viewed on June 7, 2010, <http://dif.org.ua/ua/poll>.
- ¹⁹ Cambridge Education Ltd., Step by Step Foundation, Deutsch Russisch Austausch, Center for Citizenship Education, 'Civic Education – Ukraine', August 2, 2008, viewed on June 5, 2010, <http://www.civiced.org.ua/eng/index.php>.
- ²⁰ Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 'Contemporaries of independent Ukraine'.
- ²¹ A. D. Mateo, 'Motions: 2009 WUDC', Debate and Issue 101, January 9, 2009, viewed June 6, 2010, <http://parliamentarydebate.blogspot.com/2009/01/motions-2009-wudc.html>.
- ²² Internships Program at the Verkhovna Rada and central executive bodies of Ukraine (in Ukrainian), viewed June 6, 2010, <http://www.interns.org.ua>.
- ²³ *Kyiv Post*, 'Rising Living Costs Place Kyiv High On List Of Expensive Cities', June 28, 2006, Kyiv Ukraine New Blog, viewed June 4, 2010, <http://news.kievukraine.info/2006/06/rising-living-costs-place-kyiv-high-on.html>.
- ²⁴ Cited in L. van Zoonen, *Entertaining the citizen: when politics and popular culture converge*, Rowman & Littlefield, Boulder, 2004.
- ²⁵ Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.
- ²⁶ Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'NATO-Ukraine cooperation in emergency situations' (in Ukrainian), viewed on June 10, 2010, <http://www.ukraine-nato.gov.ua/nato/ua/publication/content/16560.htm>.
- ²⁷ Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Civil dimension of NATO's activity in Ukraine' (in Ukrainian), viewed on June 10, 2010, <http://www.ukraine-nato.gov.ua/nato/ua/1543.htm>.

The Center for International Private Enterprise's 2010 International Youth Essay Competition asked young people aged 18-30 to share their ideas about democracy, entrepreneurship, and women's participation. Shofwan Kseniya Oksamytna's essay, which won third place in the 'Democracy that Delivers' category, was written in response to the following questions: "Are you satisfied with how democracy works in your country? What is a democratic government's responsibility to its people? Is it purely a question of rights or is there something more to it? What do people expect democracy to deliver in your country? How can democracy lead to higher living standards and what are the linkages between democratic and economic freedom on your country?" To learn more about the essay competition, visit www.cipe.org/essay.

Kseniya Oksamytna holds a BA in International Information from the Kyiv Institute of International Relations and Erasmus Mundus MA in Journalism and Media within Globalisation from the University of Aarhus, University of Amsterdam and City University London. She is currently pursuing her Erasmus Mundus Ph.D. in Global Governance, the EU and Multilateralism at LUISS Guido Carli (Rome, Italy).

The views expressed by the author are her own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE). CIPE grants permission to reprint, translate, and/or publish original

articles from its Economic Reform Feature Service provided that (1) proper attribution is given to the original author and to CIPE and (2) CIPE is notified where the article is placed and a copy is provided to CIPE's Washington office.

The Economic Reform Feature Service is CIPE's online and electronic article distribution service. It provides in-depth articles designed for a network of policymakers, business leaders, civic reformers, scholars, and others interested in the issues relating to economic reform and its connection to democratic development. Articles are e-mailed and posted online twice a month. If you would like to subscribe free of charge, please join the CIPE network by entering your e-mail at www.cipe.org. CIPE welcomes articles submitted by readers. Most articles run between 3-7 pages (1,000-3,000 words). All submissions relevant to CIPE's mission will be considered based on merit.

The Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) strengthens democracy around the globe through private enterprise and market-oriented reform. CIPE is one of the four core institutes of the National Endowment for Democracy. Since 1983, CIPE has worked with business leaders, policymakers, and journalists to build the civic institutions vital to a democratic society. CIPE's key program areas include anti-corruption, advocacy, business associations, corporate governance, democratic governance, access to information, the informal sector and property rights, and women and youth.