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Opinion » Op-Ed

Leaders lack will to root out corruption

Former Transportation Minister Mykola Rudovskiy in court Feb. 11 on charges of misappropriating \$200,000 for three junkets, including a three-day trip to Paris, where he was accompanied by a former Miss Ukraine, Olexandra Nikolayenko.

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Widespread corruption still hobbles Ukraine. Beyond rhetoric, little is being done to reduce it. As Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko notes, corruption has enveloped the entire higher structures of the Ukrainian state.

The Orange Revolution, like other democratic revolutions in Serbia and Georgia, were largely propelled by popular anger at high-level corruption and the accumulation of disproportionate wealth by a small group of oligarchs. Little has been done to combat this phenomenon. Business has increased its influence over politics.

Ukraine's Orange elites remain divided. President Victor Yushchenko continues to act in the manner of his predecessor, Leonid Kuchma, in undertaking a mainly cosmetic campaign against corruption. The president established a working group. But it means little, as Kuchma had many similar gestures and committees.

What is fundamental to combat corruption is political will and European Union external support, neither of which Ukraine possesses.

The president's blocking of the government's anti-corruption policies brings forth a sense of déjà vu? vu. It has the hallmarks of Kuchma's blocking of then-Deputy Prime Minister Tymoshenko's anti-corruption campaign in the energy sector during the 2000-2001 Yushchenko government. Recent examples show the president's hindrance of the nascent, but real, elements of the government's campaign against corruption.

Earlier this summer, the president sided with the Party of Regions-dominated Crimean parliament against Interior Minister Yuriy Lutsenko's campaign against organized crime on the peninsula. Many of the corrupt officials and organized crime groups use the Party of Regions as their krysha, or roof.

The president also blocked the appointment of the acting head of the Anti-Monopoly Committee after it began to investigate the monopolist position of a chicken producer, Nasha Riaba, reportedly owned by Ihor Tarasyuk. Tarasyuk is a close ally of Yushchenko and heads the Presidential Department of Affairs.

Then there are the clashes over the corrupt energy intermediary RosUkrEnergo. Recently, leaders of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova (GUAM), gathered for a regional summit in Kyiv,

signed documents on an Azeri-Georgian-Ukrainian energy corridor that promised “transparency.”

How is the West to take this promise seriously when the president does not support transparency in the Ukrainian-Russian energy relationship?

The example of post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Romania and Bulgaria, tells us that reducing corruption requires two factors: domestic political will and external support.

Both of these factors came together after 1999 in Romania and Bulgaria. Both countries underwent, like Ukraine, corrupt transitions in the 1990s, hijacked by former communist elites, whether post-communist socialist parties in Romania and Bulgaria or centrist parties in Ukraine. In 1996 and 1997, respectively, the Romanian and Bulgarian socialists received a major shock when they lost elections to reformist forces. Although fractured and inept, these reformist forces forced the socialists to transform into more authentic social democratic parties by battling corruption and supporting EuroAtlantic integration. When they returned to power in 2000/2001, the transformed Romanian and Bulgarian socialists were given the external assistance of the European Union that offered them conditional membership in 2007.

Such a shock happened to Ukraine’s centrists in 2004 when Victor Yanukovich lost the election. Yanukovich went for a long sauna to Moscow and rich Rinat Akhmetov went on a long holiday to Monaco. But the Yushchenko administration never used his massive revolutionary popularity and, instead, actually intervened in the defense of Yanukovich and Akhmetov. The president kept the circus clown, Svyatoslav Piskun, as prosecutor longer than he did Tymoshenko as prime minister.

Romania and Bulgaria’s 63rd position in 1999 in Transparency International’s corruption index has gradually improved. Ukraine’s position was similar to Romania and Bulgaria in 1999, at 75th place, but dived to 122nd in Kuchma’s last year in office in 2004.

Ukraine’s 118th place in 2007 reflects the fact that little progress has been achieved in the struggle against corruption since Yushchenko came to power three and half years ago.

Ukraine lacks important factors that existed in Romania and Bulgaria.

The Ukrainian elite aren’t interested combating corruption among its ranks. Only three elites have been imprisoned and all of these were abroad, one still in California and two who have since been released from Germany. Tymoshenko remains one of a handful of Ukraine’s elites to be imprisoned inside Ukraine, albeit for only one month.

External EU support for future membership is linked to, among other policies, a thorough overhaul of the judicial system. This membership inducement has been crucial in creating the political will in Romania and Bulgaria to combat corruption.

Unfortunately, the EU has not changed its unwelcoming stance towards Ukrainian membership since the Orange Revolution. The free trade agreements under negotiation do not include a membership offer.

The four years since the Orange Revolution have shown that the emergence of political will and the inducement of EU membership are needed for genuine success to be achieved against corruption.

Romania and Bulgaria showed how well these two elements can work. Additionally, until suspect members of Ukraine’s elite face criminal charges — rather than invitations to join philanthropic

charities — the nation will remain a highly corrupt place, with little improvement in democratization and rule of law.

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