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New Ukrainian Foundation Puts People First

by Taras Kuzio

Ukraine finally emerged as a democracy six years ago following mass protests that became known as the Orange Revolution. The human rights think tank Freedom House has rated Ukraine as "Free" since 2005, making it the only CIS country to sustain this annual ranking over a period of years.

To date, Ukraine has held four elections that were assessed by OSCE observers as "free and fair." It has also been given credit for vibrant media pluralism.

But not everything is in good democratic order in Ukraine.

Public trust in state institutions is at an all time low, corruption levels have risen over the last five years, corruption flourishes within the judicial system and the prosecutor's office, politics has become more brittle and fractured, and Ukrainian citizens are disenchanted with their leaders and with democracy.

A November 2009 International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) survey found that all of the main presidential candidates in the 2010 elections had negative ratings that ranged from 55 to 83 percent. Four million fewer Ukrainians voted in the second round of the 2010 presidential elections than in the rerun second round in December 2004.

Ukrainian citizens and the political and business elites are separated by a wide gulf of mistrust, disillusionment, and frustration. Ukrainian citizens feel excluded from the political process; people in both the east and west of the country are not contented, but they don't know how to channel their frustration into concrete actions and thereby bring about the change the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians desire.

How can this gulf be overcome and Ukraine's democracy rebuilt and strengthened?

A New Approach

May 13 marked the launch of a new nonpolitical foundation, People First, that believes it has a hitherto untried approach to promoting democracy in Ukraine.

Ukraine has been the target of democracy-promoting Western foundations, such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), for a quarter of a century. Other bodies, such as the European Union and German, British, Dutch, and Swedish foundations, have promoted democracy since the 1990s.

The People First foundation plans the most ambitious such democracy promotion effort to date. It differs from earlier programs in four ways.

First, it is funded by a Ukrainian businessman, not by an external source, which is unusual. Indeed, it is because so few Ukrainian businessmen have been willing to invest in philanthropic activities that most NGOs are forced to seek grants from abroad.

Viktor Pinchuk, one of the few exceptions, provided funding for lobbying efforts among European and U.S. elites to influence their attitudes towards Ukraine. Renat Akhmetov has aimed at influencing Ukraine's elites through a think tank that focuses on socioeconomic questions. Both, however, target elites.

The approach of People First is different. Its president, Ivan Matieshin, a Ukrainian businessman who made his fortune in the energy sector in western Siberia, targets the grassroots.

"Democracy is the voice of the people, and our program is designed to give the people a voice that is loud enough to reverberate through the corridors of power, not only in Ukraine but right across the world," Matieshin said.

Matieshin was born in Russia's Tyumen oblast, the home of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians who were either exiled for political reasons or sent there to work in the energy sector. It is no coincidence that Matieshin's roots are in Western Ukraine, confirming again the close link identified by Western and Ukrainian scholars between national identity, prodemocracy views, and civil society.

Second, People First will encourage Ukrainians to participate in a series of referendums, starting in late summer and continuing until spring of next year. This will be the most comprehensive public consultation ever undertaken in Ukraine of what citizens expect from their elected leaders and unelected officials. The results will be incorporated into a People's Charter, like a modern-day Bill of Rights.

People First hopes the charter will become the subject of a broad dialogue between elites, political parties, NGOs, and the population at large. It is here that the ambitious nature of the new foundation is evident; after all, post-Soviet ruling elites are not accustomed to listening to citizens and voters.

Building Confidence

Third, and following on from the second point, People First has hit the proverbial nail on the head in seeking to increase public efficacy and feelings of self-worth. Ukrainians feel oppressed and short-changed by their employers, politicians, and government officials and, with the exception of the Orange Revolution, have rarely fought back.

The presentation of People First stressed socioeconomic issues as much as the different elements that go to make up a democracy. No Ukrainian political leader has ever managed to strike a successful balance between addressing socioeconomic problems, national identity, and democratic values -- although widespread grievances in all three areas were behind the Orange Revolution.

Until Ukrainians are satisfied with their socioeconomic status they are unlikely to be strong supporters of democracy. Until Ukrainians see that elites have become accountable for their actions, they themselves will not respect the law. Until Ukrainians demand to be treated differently by their leaders, they will remain subjects, and will not be treated as citizens.

Fourth, People First could deal at the grassroots level with two issues that have been largely ignored by external democracy-promotion efforts to date. The first relates to periodic attempts by politicians on each side of the political divide to exacerbate regional divisions, particular during election campaigns. While it is true that Ukraine has inherited regional diversity, domestic and foreign surveys have also shown that far more unites Ukrainians than divides them.

In every established democracy, promoting a sense of national -- as opposed to regional -- identity has been a precondition for democracy-building. But that process has been relegated to the back burner for the past five years.

Energetically promoting national integration, including by striving to find areas of consensus and compromise, is therefore one of the keys to consolidating democracy in Ukraine.

Another factor is the absence of civics, or citizenship studies, in Ukraine's education system, together with

the weakness of political studies. Book-length studies on Ukrainian politics, in contrast to books on every aspect of Ukrainian history, are rare commodities. These weaknesses negatively influence the development of Ukrainian citizens and the emergence of new political leaders.

Will People First succeed in implementing what is undoubtedly an ambitious, even idealistic program? Initial reactions to its launch were skeptical, but many people have expressed approval and support.

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