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Guest post: for Ukrainian leaders, overcoming western scepticism begins at home

Sep 30, 2014 4:34pm by guest writer

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By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta

Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine's president, has returned home after making emotional pleas for support to the Canadian and US legislatures, where he received sympathy and cash but no military assistance. Poroshenko faces deep-seated scepticism among western governments and experts over

whether Ukraine's leaders can overcome their differences, fight corruption and move beyond rhetoric to action in implementing long-overdue reforms.

Chrystia Freeland, a Ukrainian-Canadian Liberal member of Canada's parliament said, "What I was really struck by on the question of support for Ukraine" at the Yalta European Strategy (YES) summit in Kiev this month, "is real western scepticism about Ukraine's ability to seriously reform and to absorb aid without corruption."

For the past two decades Ukrainian leaders have repeatedly voiced support for reforms and fighting corruption, as steps towards the goals of EU and Nato membership, but have never pursued the former to achieve the latter. Although Ukraine has received many IMF assistance packages, no government of any political stripe has moved from stabilisation to more difficult and important structural reforms.

Radical reform has only taken place in two short spurts, in 2000-2001 and 2005, and the economy has never been freed to grow to its real potential. Close ties between big business and politics has crowded out the small and medium business sector, which remains one of the most constricted in Europe.

Arseniy Yatseniuk, Ukraine's first young, English-speaking prime minister, has been a disappointment since taking office in February and struggled to defend his government's record at the YES summit.

The anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International has long ranked Ukraine as the most corrupt country in Europe. Corruption has remained high with a peak under ousted president Viktor Yanukovich, who raided the state and its budget of billions of dollars. The shadow economy has accounted for half of the country's GDP since the 1990s, costing billions of dollars each year in lost taxation. Ordinary citizens habitually dodge taxes while senior officials and oligarchs launder their money by sending it to western Europe and offshore tax havens.

The US has brought more criminal proceedings against high-ranking Ukrainians – including former prime minister Pavlo Lazarenko and gas tycoon Dmytro Firtash – than Ukrainian authorities have themselves. Meanwhile, Yanukovich's former chief of staff Serhiy Lyovchkin, energy minister Yuriy Boyko and security service head Valeriy Khoroshkovsky are all running for parliament in next month's elections.

It is little wonder that western governments are sceptical about Ukraine's ability to fight corruption or that this affects their willingness to send military assistance. Ukraine inherited a massive arsenal of Soviet weapons, many of which were illegally exported to conflict zones in places such as western Africa in the 1990s, as dramatised by Nicholas Cage in the Hollywood movie *Lord of War*.

Corruption and a collapsing military budget destroyed the effectiveness of the Ukrainian armed forces in the face of Russia's aggression, forcing Kiev to rely on volunteer nationalist battalions in the hastily created National Guard.

Western policy to Ukraine should be supportive but also guided by tough love, no longer permitting the free lunches so common in the past. Western assistance should be accompanied by clear-cut policy guidelines and suggestions for personnel appointments.

Poroshenko must prove his commitment to reform in three ways.

First, by cleaning up the Ukrainian elites, separating business and politics and making high-ranking officials accountable for their past actions.

Second, by recruiting his presidential staff, government and political force from the tens of thousands of western educated Ukrainian men and women professionals, hitherto excluded from the corridors of power. A good source would be the excellent alumni from the Canada-Ukraine Parliamentary Programme.

Georgia's successful reforms demonstrate the benefit of bringing western educated people into government, whose Soviet memory hard drives have been erased clean. It is not enough to speak English – as we have seen from Yatseniuk's poor performance.

Poroshenko faces an uphill task to overcome Ukraine fatigue and scepticism, which begins at home rather than in Ottawa or Washington DC. If he understands this he will become Ukraine's own George Washington. If he fails, he will face a new Euromaidan and join Ukraine's inglorious presidents Yushchenko and Yanukovich in the halls of infamy.

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