

Lost in Transition? - A heated debate on the civil society in Ukraine

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The conference 'Ukraine - Lost in transition?', that took place on 7 and 8 October 2010 at the *Central European University*, ended with a public panel discussion titled 'Civil society in Ukraine - is it in the making?'. The speakers were *Oleg Kokoshinsky* (Atlantic Council of Ukraine, Kyiv), *Igor Piliaev* (IAPMA, Kyiv), *Ivo Samson* (SFPA, Bratislava) and *András L. Pap* (HASc/CEU). The discussion was moderated by *Pál Tamás* (HASc).

The conversation began with summarizing the main topics after which the moderator asked the panel participants to reflect on the points raised. Pál Tamás's initial standpoint was that democratization and nation-building are not synonymous terms while the first means a globalist approach, the second requires local action. Both processes are weak in Ukraine and despite having demonstrated a public alliance in the Orange Revolution; the civil society is still unstable. The lack of a unified cultural identity can cause further difficulties in development and it also can stand in the way of Europeanization, the Western-oriented direction of development.

The first speaker *Oleg Kokoshinsky* stated that, despite the numbers indicating that in the '90s a 40% participation could have been measured in NGOs and the party membership stood at 4%, today there are still very limited opportunities for active civil participation. One source of the problems is that the Ukrainian government's attempts to improve cooperation have so far stalled at the level of rhetoric's. The Orange Revolution has already shown that the Ukrainian society is capable of being activated; however, the long-standing participation is impossible due to the economic dependency of the majority of NGOs on the state. The panellist noted that in Ukraine about 80% of the assets are owned by 50 families and for the majority of the people, who do not belong to this circle, it is impossible to gain access to the decision-making levels. As a parallel process this elite, taking advantage of the economic dependence, often tries to project their thinking onto the Ukrainian society. The opportunities are further reduced due to the decrease in western investment, aids and funds reaching the country and they are not sufficient for building a properly functioning non-governmental structure. As a result the potential organizations that could support the development of the civil society are diminishing. The next important factor, according to Kokoshinsky, is that the media is under Russian influence. In his opinion, in Ukraine the freedom of speech is not guaranteed because of the Russian control. Thus, a threat of a Russian-style democracy has appeared and without democracy, the civil society is incapable of strengthening itself.

In his opening statement, the Donetsk-born *Igor Piliajev* said that unlike in Spain or Belgium, where the proportion of ethnic groups is regularly measured, the same has never happened in Ukraine. He believes that Ukraine's integration into the western cultural system cannot have a cultural orientation since the country's identity is bond to the Russian culture. Then he started a long explanation stating that on the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries the language of handling both religious and official matters was Russian. In the Kievan Rus era the area was called 'Malarussia' or Little Russia. In addition to the fact that written Lithuanian and Polish historical documents show that they saw today's Ukraine as a Russian territory, many of Russia's prominent personalities were originally from this region. Piliajev reached the conclusion that the Russian and Ukrainian cultural identity are basically the same.

On the issue of the country's cultural division he noted that the Eastern part remained 'Russian thinker' while those living in the west turned towards the West. According to the expert, civil consciousness has a long tradition in Ukraine but differences in political thinking still lead to contradictions today. These differences, however, should not stand in the path of economic development, especially because the orientation towards the West and Russia can take place simultaneously. On the issue of the 19 years of Ukrainian independence, he said that the trends describe a totalitarian system, the desire of the civil society for freedom is still under pressure and the level of corruption is still high.

In his view, the nationalist patriotism in the country, in economically and culturally underdeveloped western parts of Ukraine, is not able to contribute to development because they cut ties with cultural traditions. Finally, he stressed that the country's roots bond Ukraine both to Europe and Russia and the bilingual country has to handle its national identity by adopting to this duality.

Ivo Samson, the expert on Slovak-Ukrainian relations highlighted that several non-governmental organizations contribute to the development of civil-military relations in Ukraine. The main areas of these relations besides national defence are the development of intelligence and police organizations (something that still remains a difficult task in most Central and Eastern European countries) and the practical implementation of security sector reforms, in which Ukraine aims to follow western patterns. In 1989, both Czechoslovakia and Ukraine appeared as communist successor states on the map. In the respect of civil-military relations, in Czechoslovakia a civilian-controlled but non-democratic regime was established. By contrast, in Ukraine these reforms are not yet implemented and so the operation of the military sector is very chaotic even today. It was a setback in both cases that these countries were not able to join the western military cooperation. In Slovakia before 2000/2001 seven attempts aiming to reform the security sector had failed and real changes only started when NATO membership became available. Unfortunately, in Ukraine the situation resembles that of Slovakia before 2001, the lack of democratic and civilian control of the military, as well as the lack of transparency continues to be a huge problem. On the positive side, the NATO Summit in Bucharest acknowledged that Ukraine is in a developing phase. According to Samson an information campaign on NATO would help the country. He also stated that in 1954 only 40-50% of the West-German population agreed on NATO accession, and Ukraine already achieved this level of support. Nevertheless, further reforms are needed, and improving civil-military relations during the transformation remains the main priority.

The last panellist *András L. Pap*, constitutional and human rights expert pointed out that although the much-discussed shortcomings exist in his view of Ukraine as well, it is important to see that the standards of living are in a constant increase. The most important thing in his opinion is to understand that nation-building is a constant process in old democracies just as well as in new ones. Self-definition will never be completed; the nations reformulate their own identities again and again. As an example he mentioned that one of his students, who arrived from Ireland, told him that he had to start learning Irish after the recognition of Irish as a national language. This was not an organic form of identity formation just like the teaching of Russian was in the Soviet-controlled areas. He emphasized that the values and traditions are very important and of course the government may also support certain principles, but they are basically determined by the society. According to him, the most important role of democracy is that it serves as an interface between the political institutions and the society. As a conclusion he highlighted two positive aspects regarding the civil society in Ukraine. The first one was that the Orange Revolution gave a social experience to the people, the lack of which causes multiple problems in Hungary. For example the Ukrainian attitude that is particularly critical on corruption is an important cornerstone of social development.

Closing the panel the floor was given to the audience to pose questions. As a number of participants came from Ukraine soon a heated debate evolved in the room. A total of nine questions and comments were raised, which were responded by the panellists afterwards.

One participant emphasized that the nation-building should not be laid on the denial of Ukrainian national identity and added that the historical aspects mentioned by Piliaiev are not valid. Several comments were raised in connection with the process of Ukrainization. One of them asked the panellists if they thought that this is equal to the cultural struggle waged against the Russians, another participant was curious whether it was possible to achieve the goals without Western-European or Russian support and without the impacts associated with that support. Another group of the audience was interested in questions related to the minorities. One Ukrainian speaker said that she never realized negative discrimination against the Russian language speakers, while yet another one stressed that not only Russia but also other minority languages, such as Hungarian, are problematic in Ukraine.

A third group of comments dealt with the civil society itself. According to one speaker the Orange Revolution reached its goal to teach self-reliance to the Ukrainian society. Several others, however, emphasized that it is not in the interest of the oligarchs to build a civil society and the regional projects are condemned to fail.

Piliaiev started his reply by saying that in Ukraine many people oppose joining NATO and found it strange that he was the only one in the room who fell in this category. He added that he did not intend to generate confrontation among Russians and Ukrainians but it is necessary to see that the Ukrainian identity must include both languages. In Kyiv one third of the people speak Russian but only 2% of the education is held in Russian language. Finally he added that Ukraine is ready to create a civil society but it cannot be completed with European support without breaking ethnical ties. Kokoshensky stressed that the development in Ukraine is not democratic and the dependence on Russia is increasing. He said that Western help meant the opportunity to many professionals to be able to maintain a certain development. He said that being able to participate in foreign projects means the air to them and it is a hugest step forward. The main point of András László Pap was that the responsibility is shared between the society and the politicians, because it is the people who, in addition to marching in the streets, are the ones who elect and tolerate incumbent politicians. According to Ivo Samson the social participation reached the first level in Ukraine in a sense that non-governmental organizations (at least in the field of civil-military relations) have the right to interfere with the activities of the ministries. By contrast, the political leadership is not yet able to reach the masses through the media. He added that in the operation of Ukrainian NGOs foreign aid is needed, although he thinks that this is an early stage and he called for development.

The speech of *Sztáray Peter*, the Political Director and the Deputy State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, closed the conference. He welcomed the changes in Ukraine's foreign policy and expressed the hope that the new Ukrainian and Hungarian governments will support the renewal of cooperation. The Hungarian interest is to bring Ukraine closer to the West and Hungary, as the next president of the EU, wishes to provide any help to its neighbour in this process. He understands that the country's accession to NATO is not relevant now but if Ukraine is willing to accept the help, Hungary is ready to be a mediator in closing ties. He sees signs of cooperation regarding Ukraine's participation in missions both in Afghanistan and Kosovo and he hopes that Ukraine's accession to NATO will soon become a reality.

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