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Political Culture in Ukraine¹

Abstract

The “Euromaidan” protests in Ukraine (2013-2014) were motivated by people’s great expectations of profound change through implementation of reforms and genuine democratisation of the society. Realisation of these expectations depends on many factors, including the pattern of political culture, which reflects people’s readiness to actively contribute to the establishment of a new democratic regime in their country. Analysis of citizens’ political orientations over the past two decades shows that only a small part of the population can be called strong democrats, whereas the majority of people avoids active political participation and holds a rather output-oriented position, which may facilitate persistence of an authoritarian political regime. On the other hand, a new social movement represented by recently emerged numerous volunteer organisations and initiatives indicates a substantial positive change in people’s political orientations.

Keywords: *political culture, political orientations, civil society*

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Political Orientations and Stability of the Political System

Why are some political systems stable and others not? Why does the introduction of democratic institutions not automatically lead to a consolidated democracy? What role do people's political orientations play in the process of democratisation? The political culture approach [Almond, Verba, 1963; Dalton, Welzel, 2014] is currently one of the best established theoretical concepts that help to find answers to these questions.

A general definition of the term "political culture" reads as follows: "... the political system as internalised in the cognitions, feelings, and evaluations of its population" [Almond, Verba, 1963: p. 14]. The political culture approach focuses on political orientations toward political objects, such as the system in general, political input and output processes, and the role of the self in the system. The basic idea of this approach is to capture patterns of attitudes, beliefs and values of the population, in order to explore whether political institutions and people's orientations are congruous. The fundamental assumption behind this approach is that "a democratic form of participatory political system requires as well a political culture consistent with it" [Almond, Verba, 1963: p. 5]. If such consistency is not given, political institutions are likely to fail to perform their essential functions. As a result, the political system may become unstable.

Although the concept of political culture does not encompass explanatory mechanisms of conflicts between people's orientations and institutional performance, it can indicate a mismatch between "structure and culture" and thus be used for prognosis of possible instability of the political system. For understanding of the post-communist transformation, the political culture approach provides a conceptual framework of analysis of the change in people's political "mentality", i.e. their perceptions of the rules of the societal game.

Types of Political Culture

Almond and Verba described three ideal types of political culture: parochial, subject and participant. A *parochial* political culture is typical of pre-modern societies whose population has diffuse political-economic-religious orientations, hardly any knowledge of the political system and ambiguous feelings towards it. A higher awareness of specialised governmental authority and more distinct affective and normative political orientations are typical of the *subject* political culture. However, subjects are mostly output-oriented and do not consider themselves as active participants of the political process. A *participant* political culture, in contrast, is characterised by active contribution of the citizens to political life; this contribution is being guided by comprehensive political knowledge.

In modern societies, participant orientations manifest themselves in vital interest in local and national politics. Active citizens perform collective action by joining or establishing civil society organisations which are known to be a powerful source of bridging social capital [Putnam, 2000]. Therefore, the level of development of civil society (the so-called third sector) and its relationship with the state can serve as an important indicator of the participant political culture.

Another typical feature of participant orientations, which distinguishes them from the parochial and subject ones, is the sense of individual responsibility

for the situation in the country and community. *Participants* are conscious of their role as citizens for the establishment of social order and promotion of democratic norms. Ideally, their support of democratic institutions is based on reflection upon and acceptance of the basic principles of democracy: political pluralism, participation and representation, division of powers, and rule of law.

In fact, various mixtures of the three ideal types can be observed. The so-called *civic culture*, which Almond and Verba considered to be the most conducive to a democratic political system, is a pattern of all three types, with a domination of participant features, while “the subject and parochial orientations ‘manage’ or keep in place the participant political orientations” [Almond, Verba, 1963: p. 32].

Soviet Legacy

As political culture — especially the system of values and key social norms — turns out to be less prone to short-term changes than political institutions, analysis of the transformation of political orientations in the independent Ukraine should begin with the late Soviet period.

On the eve of the Soviet Union’s breakup, a group of sociologists under the supervision of Yurii Levada published one of their most famous works, “An Ordinary Soviet Man”, based on the analysis of survey data collected in all 15 Soviet republics between 1989 and 1991. Similar to Almond and Verba, Levada suggested that the “quality of the human material” could to a large extent determine political as well as other post-communist social structures.

According to Levada (1993) and his research team, the dominant “sociocultural type of personality” in the late Soviet period was the so-called *Homo Sovieticus*. Researchers characterised this personality as a deindividualised mass man, who holds paternalistic orientations and is “primitive” with respect to his needs. At the same time, *Homo Sovieticus* has messianic and imperialistic aspirations and is convinced of being something special in a historical perspective.

By the end of the 1980s, a large share of “ordinary Soviet people” had been politically socialised in the post-war and even post-Stalin era and experienced a period of relative economic prosperity and ideological stability during the Brezhnevian Stagnation. From the early childhood, Soviet people learned to be a part of a bigger whole by participating in different structures that were created and maintained by the state (e.g., *Little Octobrists*, *Young Pioneers*). The channels of social mobility were strictly defined and controlled, while individual initiatives that did not fit the all-encompassing framework of the Soviet state and ideology were suppressed. Under a full state management of one’s life, adaptation to established rules was less costly than attempts to change the situation. Yet instead of true loyalty, the repressive political system cultivated political passivity and reluctance to participate in public life. Contrary to the collectivist doctrine, the real sense of responsibility was restricted to a family circle and the most trusted friends. The largest part of responsibility for the organisation of “ordinary” people’s life including economic activities, housing, education etc. rested upon the state.

Individualism — understood as being different from others — was scorned, since it was incompatible with the totalitarian “one-size-fits-all approach” and

the Marxist-Leninist ideology with its absolute truth claim. Such a context made pluralism of opinions, interests, ways of self-expression impossible and fostered discrepancy between form and content of people’s actions, between artificial formal and genuine informal life, between proclaimed and real values.

One of the far-reaching consequences of this “doublethink” was strengthening of informal social networks that, on the one hand, helped people get access to scarce goods and services and, on the other hand, provided an opportunity to openly articulate their personal views, especially on politically sensitive issues.

On the eve of the Soviet Union’s collapse, Levada was going to observe the dissolution of the “personality of Homo Sovieticus”, not least in the face of an all-embracing institutional crisis and imperatives of modernity [Lewada, 1993: p. 36 ff]. The end of the Soviet experiment marked a new period of history for the new independent states.

“Strong Leaders” or Political Ideologies?

For 20 years of independence, Ukraine has experienced two large democratically oriented “revolutions” (“Orange Revolution” in 2004-2005 and the “Euro-maidan” in 2013-2014). At the end of 2004, mass protests at the Independence Square in Kiev prevented electoral fraud and helped to launch democratic reforms. Unfortunately, this “revolution” failed even after successful constitutional reforms, because fundamental institutions and conventional practices remained unchanged. Pro-democratic activists did not succeed in keeping their leaders on the right track after they heaved them into power. In the year 2006, disagreements within the “orange” coalition resulted in the highest level of desire for a strong leader that has ever been recorded in Ukraine – 65.7% (See Fig. 1).

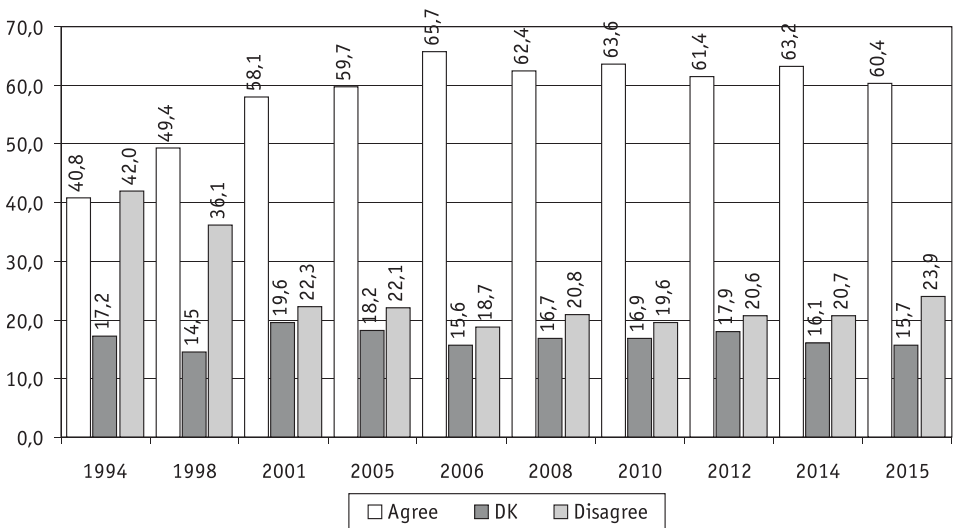


Figure 1. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “A couple of strong leaders can do more for the country than all laws and discussions”? (%)

Source: Monitoring 1994-2014 and Public Opinion in Ukraine 2015 Databases. The data of 2015 do not include Crimea.

The diagram shows that, during the 1990s, the proportion of people who agreed with the statement that “a couple of strong leaders can do more for the country than all laws and discussions” considerably increased. In the 2000s, it remained practically unchanged, standing at nearly 60%. Nine consecutive years of economic decline after independence had led to a substantial impoverishment of the population and disenchantment in the “democratic disorder”. Many people referred the shambles of the 1990s to the absence of a strong leader – as a result, paternalistic views experienced revival. The personalistic approach that “an effective state manager” can compensate for institutional weakness could have been even stronger than in the late Soviet times, when there had been state institutions which in the face of communist leaders’ senility (Brezhnev and his two successors) made the political system work.

Strong paternalistic, leader-centered orientations are typical of parochial and subject types of political culture. In Ukraine, these orientations have been repeatedly exploited during parliamentary election campaigns, when political parties were formed around persons instead of programs and principles. Given a list of political ideologies (e.g., “liberal”, “socialist”, “social democratic”, etc.) and an opportunity to suggest another one, almost half of respondents – 49.3% in the *Monitoring Survey* in 2014 – had no preferences, had not decided yet or simply had no idea of those ideologies. One year after the “Euromaidan”, the share of respondents without any preference in the spectrum of political ideologies decreased significantly and made up 38.2%. In the year 2015, the survey has documented an increase in number of adherents of social democratic as well as national democratic forces. Still, the proportion of people with no ideological preferences remains very high, which is an indicator of missing political knowledge and, apparently, lack of interest in politics.

Table 1

How interested would you say you are in politics? (%)

	Ukraine	Germany	Sweden	France	Italy	Estonia	Poland	Czech Republic
Very interested	5.3	20.2	13.2	12.6	12.6	5.4	6.2	2.2
Quite interested	27.0	44.5	45.2	30.4	31.6	35.7	33.4	19.6
Hardly interested	43.8	29.9	30.5	36.4	35.8	43.8	42.8	49.7
Not at all interested	23.9	5.4	11.1	20.6	19.9	15.2	17.6	28.5

Source: European Social Survey 2012

International surveys confirm a rather low interest in politics in Ukraine. According to the European Social Survey, in 2012, similar to other post-communist states of Central Europe, only 5.3% of Ukrainian respondents said to be very interested and 27% to be quite interested in politics, whereas in Western European countries these figures were much higher (see Table 1).

Another key element of political orientations of the Ukrainian population concerns the vector of foreign policy orientations. This vector does not provide a clear-cut distinction between conservative “Eastern” and liberal “Western” values as Ukrainians are often guided by an intuitive sense of belonging to a certain (historically defined) cultural space, yet it indicates sympathies either with consolidated authoritarian regimes of Putin’s Russia and Lukashenka’s Belarus or with the democratic community of EU countries.

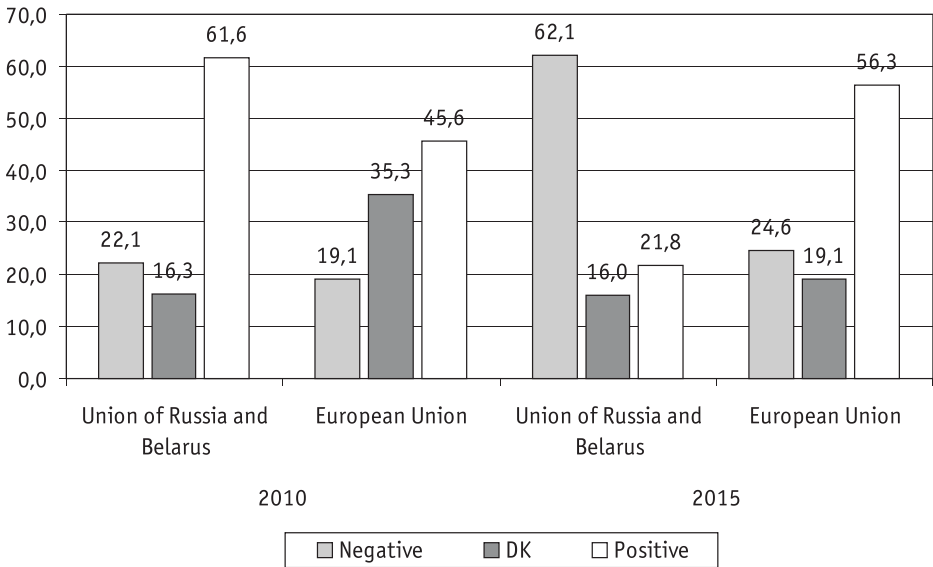


Figure 2. How do you regard the idea of Ukraine’s joining... the Union of Russia and Belarus? ... the European Union? (%)

Source: Monitoring 1994-2014 and Public Opinion in Ukraine 2015 Databases. The data of 2015 do not include Crimea.

The “Euromaidan” protests and subsequent annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation along with Russia’s active involvement in the armed conflict in Donbas led to a reorientation of many Ukrainians from East to West. In 2010, 61.6% of the Ukraine’s population regarded the perspective of Ukraine’s joining the Union of Russia and Belarus positively; while in 2015 the picture was quite the reverse: 62.1% of respondents rejected this option. At the same time, support of Western integration (joining the European Union) became more popular: it increased from 45.6% in 2010 to 56.3% in 2015 (See Fig. 2).

Tolerance and Pluralism

Being tolerant to those who are different, respecting the rights of minorities and accepting complexity of a social environment are important democratic attitudes and values. Empirical researches have shown that tolerance is associated with economic growth. Open societies are more attractive to people with different backgrounds and provide the most favourable environment for creativity and innovation. A totalitarian state, which suppresses not only political opposition,

but also — as far as possible — all kinds of pluralism, fosters intolerance and one-sided thinking.

Many Ukrainians experienced both the monopoly of the Communist Party and a great diversity of political parties and movements after 1991. Political pluralism was a new, so far unfamiliar phenomenon to the post-Soviet states. The growing diversity of the political spectrum perplexed inexperienced voters who tried to adapt to the new conditions when many parties were formed around political entrepreneurs pursuing their personal economic interests.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the share of respondents who did not support a multiparty system in Ukraine grew significantly in the 1990s and stood at nearly 45% after the failed “Orange Revolution” (See Fig. 3).

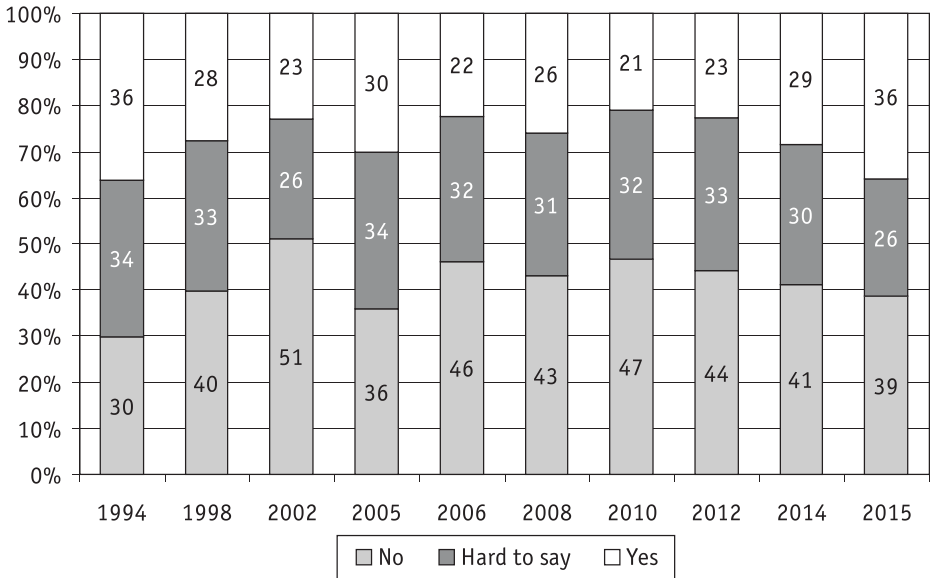


Figure 3. Do you think Ukraine needs a multiparty system? (%)

Source: Monitoring 1994-2014 and Public Opinion in Ukraine 2015 Databases. The data of 2015 do not include Crimea.

Rejection of the multiparty system may be, to a large extent, attributed to chaotic politics and a permanent crisis of the political system, to economic hardships during transformation as well as to the “after-effect” of Soviet socialisation, while a high proportion of those who could not (or did not want to) give a definite answer most likely indicates disinterest in political life and political alienation.

Once the “Euromaidan” put an end to the authoritarian and criminal regime of Viktor Yanukovich, the share of proponents of political pluralism began to grow again and reached 36% in 2015 (nearly the same figure had been recorded in 1994).

Mass Protests vs. Civil Society Engagement

In the autumn of 2013, activists started to demonstrate against President Yanukovich’s refusal to sign the EU Association Agreement. Demonstrations

rapidly transformed into a protest of population against the government, which lost its legitimacy in the eyes of protesters by violently breaking up the peaceful demonstration. The “Revolution of Dignity” firmly stood for European (i.e. Western, democratic) values: rule of law, non-oligarchic market economy, welfare state and civil society.

According to surveys conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, almost one fifth of the Ukrainian population took part in the mass protests in their city or supported the protesters by providing food, warm clothes or money. The “Euromaidan” protesters were on average younger, more often self-employed and considerably better educated than the general population of Ukraine (See Fig. 4).

The five most often mentioned demands of protesters included: release of arrested demonstrators and end of repressions, resignation of the President Yanukovich and conducting a new presidential election, resignation of the government as well as criminal prosecution of corrupt politicians and those who were responsible for violence against protesters [Ukraine-Analysen 2013]. Apparently, the “Revolution of Dignity” was made primarily by those representatives of Ukrainian society who were not ready to tolerate the authoritarian corrupt regime anymore.

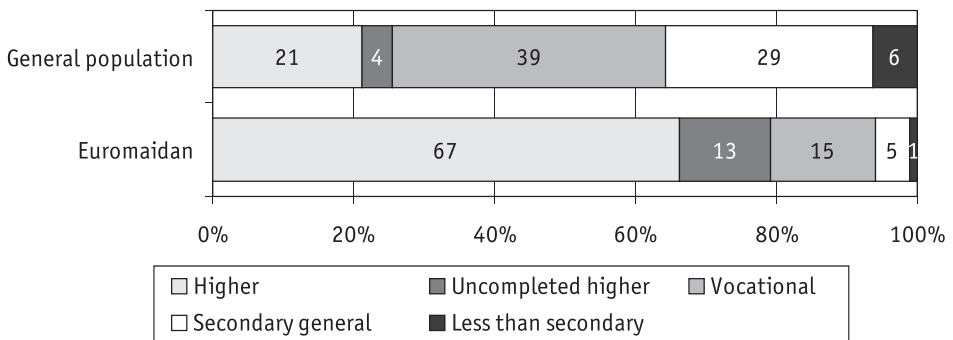


Figure 4. Educational level of the general population and of the “Euromaidan” participants

Source: Monitoring 2014 and the “Euromaidan” Survey 7-8.12.2013.

The “Euromaidan” protests and subsequent armed conflict in the Donbas region have had a great consolidating and cohesive effect on many Ukrainians. A new social movement occurred as a reaction of the population to a difficult situation in the East of Ukraine: people started to found numerous volunteer organisations and launch initiatives that supported the Ukrainian army, provided help to internally displaced citizens from the eastern regions and performed other social and political activities. During the last year, 44% of Ukrainian citizens either supported volunteer organisations and initiatives or provided financial help to Ukrainian army through the governmental channel [Public Opinion in Ukraine 2015]. The data show that people donated money or provided in-kind support (food, clothes, medicine, etc.) more actively than personally engaged in volunteer activities (See Fig. 5). Approximately 30% of Ukraine’s population donated money to volunteers in the last 12 months, while 7% transferred money via SMS to the specially created account of the Ministry of Defense.

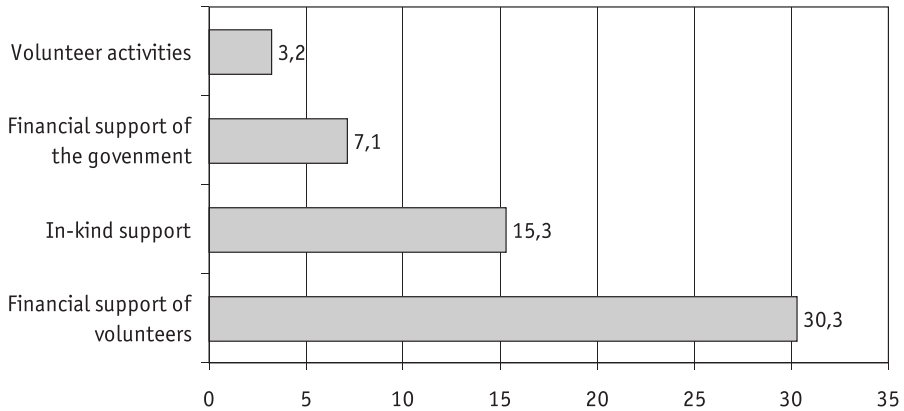


Figure 5. Volunteer activities and support of Ukrainian army

Source: Public Opinion in Ukraine 2015 Database. The data do not include Crimea.

Although engagement in volunteer activities may not be considered ubiquitous (only 3.2% of people performed volunteer activities either in the region of military conflict or outside it: in hospitals, refugee support groups, etc.), this new phenomenon is very important for Ukraine because it strengthens the civil society. Volunteers demonstrate self-organisational skills and ability to effectively solve various urgent problems. Besides, volunteer organisations help to foster personal activism and social responsibility of citizens.

There are two major types of civic activism in Ukraine: participation in mass protests and engagement in civil society organisations. They only partially overlap: 17% of citizens participated in the “Euromaidan” either by protesting or providing food, clothes or money while only 13% of Ukrainians were members of civil society organisations at that time [Monitoring Survey, 2014]. Among the “Euromaidan” participants 73.9% did not belong to any civil society organisation. Despite the fact that almost every fifth citizen participated in the “Euromaidan”, political activism of protesters seems to be of a short-term nature. Mass protests were a spontaneous reaction (which is opposed to action) whereas engagement in volunteer organisations has more to do with planned and enduring social activity [Gatskova, Gatskov, 2015]. Yet only a long-term engagement of citizens in civil society organisations can actually be conducive to the participant political culture.

Conclusions and Recommendations

What in the public discourse is often referred to as “national character” or “mentality”, can be scientifically captured by the concept of political culture. This concept helps to explain reform failures and – more generally – political instability by analysing rigidity of political orientations of the population.

Reconstruction of Ukrainians’ political orientations on the basis of survey data for the last two decades produces a picture that is far from being comforting and promising. “Participant” and other pro-democratic orientations constitute a minor part of the population’s politico-cultural pattern, especially in Eastern Ukraine. On the timeline, notable changes in individual attitudes and national

patterns of political orientations occurred in the aftermath of major political and economic events and not prior to them. The majority of Ukraine's population avoids active political participation and remains output-oriented, which may facilitate persistence of an authoritarian political regime.

However, it is important to keep in mind that Ukrainians have never lived in a consolidated democracy since political system of the independent Ukraine has always been more or less authoritarian, and that only a negligible share of the population had experience of living abroad in a Western democratic society. As a result, many Ukrainians have a very vague and sometimes extremely distorted idea of democracy, so they hardly know what are democratic principles, institutions and procedures like.

As R.J. Dalton and Ch. Welzel noted, participants in the true sense may be "absent not only because the system would repress them but also because the citizens have not learned the role model of a participant citizen" [Dalton, Welzel, 2014: p. 5]. Having no tradition of participant political culture, people in Ukraine tend to reproduce well-known mechanisms of social interaction from the Soviet and early post-Soviet past. In contrast to consolidated democracies where new generations almost automatically learn how "democracy works", in countries with no democratic traditions like Ukraine these mechanisms have to be learned by other means.

One of the most important sources of democratic pluralism is certainly Ukraine's regional diversity which made it impossible for any power elite to become the only option in the last two decades. Despite being fraught with conflict, regional diversity creates a favourable environment for learning how to deal with ethno-linguistic, religious and cultural differences and thus to become more tolerant. This process may be accelerated through promotion of Ukrainians' internal mobility by improving transport and tourism infrastructure, as well as through development of national student (including high school) exchange programs, etc.

Formal education is another important channel for forming political culture: high schools and universities should provide effective political and civic education for their students, as well as promote exchange programs with students from democratic countries. Universities should have more academic freedom and autonomy. Besides, European and American foundations could carry out a five to ten-year program for fostering student self-administration at Ukrainian universities. It is important, though, to closely cooperate with the Ministry of Education in this matter and to carefully monitor the results in order to avoid adverse effect described above as "form without content".

At the level of civil society, it would be advisable to partly readdress financial assistance to Ukraine, which aims to further development of the third sector. It may turn out that it is more effective to give money to those who are ready to volunteer than to professionals who are pursuing an alternative career in the third sector. The focus of financial and institutional aid should be less on overall and professional promotion of democratisation but more on projects that can improve the quality of life. Although these projects deal with "smaller" issues, people will directly perceive their beneficial outcomes. This, in turn, may encourage involvement in voluntary sector and thereby promote democratisation in the medium and long run.

With regard to political competition and representation, the existing political parties ought to develop a sharper “ideological” profile instead of being paternalistic or leader-centered (P. Poroshenko, V. Klychko, O. Liashko, etc.) political enterprises. Among all of Ukraine’s political parties the crisis-tested *Bat’kivshchyna* (“Fatherland”) and a young party *Samopomich* (“Self-Reliance”) seem most promising in this respect.

At the level of state institutions, democratic partners of Ukraine should maintain pressure on the central state power to become more transparent and delegate more functions to regional and local bodies. Besides, it should not be forgotten that without a truly independent and corruption-free judiciary even “participant” citizens will never learn to respect the rule of law.

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