

## Democracy in Ukraine - On the Right Path?

### *Summary*

The conference was opened by the Director of the International Centre for Democratic Transition, **Mr. Dr. István Gyarmati**, who in his introduction pointed out that the international community frequently mistakenly assumes that it knows how to approach a conflict situation, and in his view the present case of Ukraine is not an exception. He emphasized that when we are searching for a resolution of the crisis we must not ignore the opinion of the Ukrainians on their country and how they think its fate should look like. In the light of the Russian aggression Dr. Gyarmati described the dilemma the international community has been facing since 2008 starting with the events in Georgia until the territorial claims of Russia in Ukraine nowadays, which raises the question that how far is the desire of protecting freedom and promoting democracy.

In his speech **Mr. István Ígyártó**, Minister of State for Cultural Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary regarded the Ukrainian crisis as a multilevel problem. At the regional level the conflict influences policies within the V4 member states, whereas on the international level the biggest concern is the relationship between Ukraine and Russia and the establishment of peace. For the stabilization and consolidation of Ukraine it is essential to rehabilitate the economic and financial situation, to increase the state's capacity for structural reforms, and to help the reintegration of the country in the international economic alliances. Mr. Ígyártó believes that the increased level of confidence among the Ukrainian citizens and their commitment towards democracy may help the new Ukrainian government to successfully tackle these issues.

**Mr. Ferenc Jári**, the representative of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) explained that besides ICDT's experience, it was the strong and innovative project proposal the Centre submitted which convinced the Fund to support the project, as the involvement of private companies, such as GfK, into the civil society area is the new direction the IVF would like to follow. In his opinion, Ukraine's case has a lot of strong parallel examples with the challenges the V4 countries faced at beginning of their transition period. The experience these countries gained over the years may definitely help Ukraine in terms of conducting reform processes, establishing institutions, building civil society and implementing a consistent policy of European integration.

**Mr. Ákos Kozák**, the Managing Director of GfK Hungary, shortly presented the main conclusions of the empirical research of the project. He underlined that besides the increased trust in democratic values also the active participation of citizens in the political processes is crucial for a country's democratic development. The existing positive democratic attitudes of Ukrainians can help

to eliminate heritage of authoritarianism, however the still existing nostalgia for the Soviet regime may still create a ground for dictatorship. Therefore, analyzing the public opinion about democracy is highly relevant in the current political situation.

**Dr. Gabor Sugatagi** gave a presentation on his research regarding the differences between Ukraine and the Visegrad countries and how those differences result in different levels of support for democracy. He highlighted the importance of having a democratic Ukraine for the region as well as for its immediate neighbors. He explained why the similarities in the history of these countries, including their Soviet past, makes them ideal for comparison with one another.

The methodology that was used in the research paper was based on a series of surveys carried out in the countries that are being compared. Some of the questions asked were meant to gauge the level of democratic support amongst the mass public, while other questions were designed to assist in measuring the levels of public trust in different institutions including the legislative branch, the media, and the police, among other public and private institutions. The answers that were given by the respondents regarding the different questions were used to categorize the different respondents into 'Strong Democrats', 'Worried Democrats', 'Alienated Democrats' and 'Authoritarians'. This kind of classification made it easier to identify differing trends and similarities in the populations of the countries that were compared.

Dr. Sugatagi continued by discussing the different figures and data that has been collected, how the respondents from the different countries answered the questions from the surveys differently and what those different answers indicate regarding the political sentiment in the respective countries. Afterwards, he outlined the different theories that help to explain why there are different levels of support for democracy between different populations in the respective countries. These theories can provide different explanations as to why people might exhibit varying degrees of democratic support.

Finally, Dr. Sugatagi listed the different factors that influence the level of democratic support in Ukraine and how those factors make it different from the Visegrad countries. These factors range from age, ethnicity and gender, to economic wellbeing, public security and future economic prospects that people expect for themselves, among others. Some of these factors were found to have a direct effect on the levels of support for democracy by the population, while other factors were not found to have a strong effect individually. Dr. Sugatagi ended the presentation with a brief outline of the factors that he thinks played the most important role in influencing people view of democracy.

**Mr. Michael L. Smith**, Researcher at the Economics Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, in his presentation gave an insightful analysis of the relation between democratic values and civic and political participation in the Visegrad countries and Ukraine.

Mr. Smith began his presentation with the intriguing question of why we should care about democratic consciousness. The researcher pointed out that one of the reasons is that political values can drive political behavior. He mentioned that democratic attitudes are not only about what people believe, but an impact how they engage civically and politically. He underlined that other political values, such as postmaterialist values, have been linked to engagement with non-traditional forms of political participation and postmaterialism does not simply motivate political participation, but it also embodies the values that postmaterialists strive for. Consequently, in his presentation Mr. Smith intended to explore the relationship between democratic attitudes, as well as postmaterialism, on a variety of forms of civic and political participation in Ukraine and the Visegrad states.

In his analysis, Mr. Smith identified that democratic attitudes do contribute to civic and political engagement, but depends on how to define those attitudes. The researcher stressed the importance of postmaterialism in explaining civic and political engagement better than more explicit questions on democratic attitudes. Next, he highlighted that democratic attitudes can also impact voter behavior. In the following section, Mr. Smith underlined the importance of education being a major predictor of civic and political engagement in the Visegrad states and Ukraine. He also pointed out that trust matters as well, but it is less relevant. In his closing remarks, Mr. Smith drew the attention to the fact that there is a disconnect between democratic values and what we might see as healthy democratic behavior. He pointed out that the latter has a myriad of possible causes, which means that promoting democratic behavior indicates focusing much more on grassroots democracy

**Mr. Peter Golias**, Director of the Bratislava-based Institute for Economic and Social Reforms (INEKO), gave a highly informative presentation about the interplay between democratic consciousness and economic development in V4 countries and Ukraine.

Mr. Golias shared his personal belief in the positive correlation between economic reforms and the development of democracy, stating that the great majority of developed countries have stable democratic regimes. Interestingly, the recent GFK survey's findings stood testament to the eroding popular trust in government institutions and political parties in V4 countries despite the improved economic conditions that the citizens enjoy today. Nevertheless, Mr. Golias expressed his optimistic view that the genuine democratic transition of Ukraine is just a matter of time.

Moreover, the attention of the conference's participants was drawn to the enduring problem between state paternalism and individualism. Owing in no small part to the ongoing political and military upheaval in Ukraine, the country's population showed a high level of economic collectivist views on the one hand, and was sympathetic to the idea of having a strong, decisive leader rather than a parliament.

In his closing remarks, Mr. Golias highlighted the importance of democratic development not only by means of pro-democratic reforms but also by executing pro-market changes which benefit the welfare of people. At the end of his presentation Mr. Golias drew the example of Slovakia, where a strong reform-minded group played a great role in fostering effective changes in the country, arguing that the existence of a similar group would help Ukraine a lot, as well. The presentation ended on a high note, with Mr. Golias emphasizing the significance of voicing public opinion, thereby generating public pressure on today's regimes.

**Mr. Bartosz Bartczak**, Project Manager at the Globalization Institute from Gliwice, Poland, in his presentation offered an insightful evaluation of the Ukrainian transition to democracy by drawing on the successful Post-Soviet Polish history.

Mr. Bartczak's began his presentation with identifying key steps of the Polish way to democracy, and quickly recognized the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014 as the very first step towards a genuinely liberal Ukrainian regime. Despite this crucial step, Ukrainians were found to be less trustful of democracy as their Polish counterparts, and were likely to have nostalgic feelings towards the late communist regime. However, a positive trend in the people's democratic attitudes is clearly visible, while ongoing economic troubles continue to be the general source of mistrust in government institutions.

Similarly to previous speakers of the conference, Mr. Bartczak underlined the importance of economic freedom as a condition of any established democracy, advocating for quick, decisive reforms. Going further, key lessons from Poland's democratic transition were mentioned, such as the emphasis on involving the oppositional political forces in the official discussion about Ukraine's future, or the need to strike a balance between regions and the central government by decreeing effective administrative reforms. Lastly, Mr. Bartczak confirmed the beneficial role that Poland can play during the course of Ukraine's democratic transition by advocating for the country's membership bid to the European Union and NATO, implementing various exchange programs, and enacting government policies which support the Polish civil society in imparting their experience with their Ukrainian partners.

**Ms. Iryna Bekeshkina**, Director of the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in the introduction of her presentation drew up the example of the Visegrad countries, as models of successful transition countries that could help us better understand the reality and specifications of Ukraine.

She identified three stages of the so-called 'triple transformation' regarding democracy in Ukraine. Firstly, the transformations from a republic dependent on Moscow into an independent state, secondly, an authoritarian regime into a democracy and thirdly, a state economy into a market economy. The attempts between the 1990s and 2004, however, created dysfunctional democratic institutions and an oligarchic capital, intensified corruption and extended control over mass media. Soon the inevitable question whether to

integrate Ukraine into the European Union or tighten the relations with Russia appeared, and ultimately, created a strong division among citizens. The growing phenomenon of corruption led to the disillusionment of citizens that held Viktor Yanukovich to power in the 2012 elections. His regime however, created an authoritarian government that started political repression, consolidated the opposition and hence, the civil society once again lost its illusions in its leaders.

After outlining the background of the current events, Ms Bekeshkina continued with the events at Maidan that turned into an anti-authoritarian democratic revolution, which has ended with the escape of Yanukovich and the change of authorities. The events posed new threats to Ukraine and new challenges to democracy, most importantly the Russian aggression, the separation of Ukraine, the civic war and the economic default. Tensions became high that intensified a mutual negative attitude between Russia and Ukraine.

Ms. Iryna Bekeshkina concluded her presentation with the comments that Ukraine is at a crossroad where the main questions are whether it can survive as an independent country that is an integral part of Europe or Europe will turn away from Ukraine. She warned that the future of post-communist part of Europe is now being determined on Ukrainian soil.

*16<sup>th</sup> of December 2014, Budapest*