

Ukrainian perceptions: engaging in corruption is necessary to survive

By Ruud Buijvoets and Pavlo Cherchatyi

Ask a young Ukrainian citizen what kind of behavior can never be justified. There is a high likelihood that the answer will be homosexuality, well above abortion, tax evasion, and the problem of corruption. To quote a 28-year old girl from Lviv, “putting 100 hryvnias into a doctor’s pocket is not the same thing as a boy sleeping with another boy. Bribery is normal.” Engaging in bribery is perceived to be a given fact that seeps through all layers of Ukrainian society.

The widespread perception that corruption is an inevitable part of daily life severely hampers the democratization process in Ukraine. Although the corruption index by Transparency International shows an improvement for Ukraine from taking the 142nd spot in 2014 to coming in at place 120 in 2018, weak checks and balances still paralyze the political and societal system. Transparency International stresses that corruption is endemic in Ukraine to this very day.

The latest survey on reform priorities in Ukraine shows that the most-wanted reform by Ukrainians is anti-corruption reforms. As Alexei Bayer aptly puts it, in order to defeat corruption, you need to use principles of a liberal democracy. Therefore, to address the challenges of corruption in Ukraine, there are two key changes we believe are needed.

Fighting the shadow economy: from receiving money in the envelope to fair salaries

First, the official wages of Ukrainians must be raised. Fair salaries for officials can guarantee a better quality of life and reduce the need to engage in bribery. To illustrate the precarious situation many government officials find themselves in, we only have to take a look at the average salary of diplomats. Diplomats earn about \$160 US dollars per month, far below the average monthly wage of around \$350 US dollars. Again, and this should not come as a surprise, it leads to what we would call ‘survival bribery’.

To tackle this issue on a domestic level, the Ukrainian government needs to pay government officials accordingly. Without a fair wage, the odds are against a serious improvement of the problem of corruption any time soon.

We should keep in mind that some 40% of Ukraine’s economy is in the shadows, exactly because of issues pertaining to corruption. Higher wages could not only lead to lower levels of corruption, but also to a higher state income through taxes. Which then, in turn, can be spent on the salaries of government officials. To put it simply, the government has to plan its budget differently.

Ukraine as a fully-fledged partner for the EU

Second, the EU should ramp up its efforts to assist Ukraine in its aspirations to become a liberal democracy. Right now, Ukraine finds itself in a grey zone. A country

that is being pulled from two sides without having the proper chance to blossom into a more prosperous country in the future.

To paraphrase Andreas Umland, a German-Ukrainian political scientist and expert, from a public discussion, the idea perpetuated by the EU that an association agreement will transform a country into a more democratic state, is erroneous. Rather than approaching Ukraine with the question of 'this is what you have to do to belong to us', the EU should actively assist the Ukrainian government in its democratization process and ask the question of 'what is it that you need'. This shift in attitude can greatly benefit both sides in attaining closer political ties and fruitful mutual cooperation.

The anti-corruption framework that has been set up in Ukraine in the last five years needs to be closely watched by both Ukrainian civil society and the EU. We have seen far-reaching anti-corruption measures that other EU member states might never take. A public declaration of income and properties for members of parliament accessible to every Ukrainian citizen is unprecedented in the EU. So is an online course designed for 150,000 civil servants to learn about anti-corruption tools.

The challenge, however, lies in the enforcement of these anti-corruption measures. Taking the online course for civil servants as an example, only 2/3 of all civil servants have completed the course. We can find similar hiccups with the e-declaration system for government officials. Even though civil servants face a 8-year prison sentence when they refuse to declare all of their assets, prosecution remains largely absent according to a spokesperson of the United Nations Development Programme. For these reasons, the EU has to fully support the recently established anti-corruption court financially and expertise-wise.

A successful pathway to democratization starts with a change in people's mindsets. Combined with the right course of action, corruption will become less persistent. But when ordinary Ukrainians do not acknowledge the problem of engaging in bribery themselves first, then successfully fighting corruption will remain an intangible dream.