

Reforms are no zip ties: Demands for quick and easy fixes are a threat to Ukraine

By Charlotte Felbinger, Elena Leuschner and Klara Lindahl

When Mykola Tomenko, a leading opposition figure in Ukrainian politics for the past 17 years, talks about the future of his country, his language is analytic and pragmatic. There is no trace of the heated tone that has recently dominated Ukrainian politics. When asked about the greatest challenges Ukraine is currently facing, he speaks of corruption, the national economy, and the military threat in the East. But the biggest threat for Ukraine, he adds, is the public's desire for quick and easy fixes. What Tomenko refers to is the present climate of frustration with the reform progress. It is in part the result of a gap between slow but steady political change and the public perception of stagnation. If this gap is not closed, popular support for reforms will break off and put future progress at risk.

Perceived stagnation of the reform process causes frustration

Taking a look at recent media reporting on Ukraine's reform progress, a daunting picture emerges. What dominates are accounts of persistent corruption and calls for stepping up reform efforts. This is also reflected in public opinion polls. More than a third of the population says they have not experienced any reform effects, another third reports solely negative experiences¹. In a country that has recently undergone a revolution, the perceived lack of improvement is bound to cause major frustration. The most prevalent cause for such frustration is corruption pervading every aspect of life. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Ukrainians consider corruption to be so severe that the country ranks 120th worldwide, sharing its rank with countries such as Mali and Liberia². Moreover, 43% of the Ukrainian population believe that corruption is increasing rather than declining³. These numbers reveal an alarming public perception of stagnation.

“WE HAVE SEEN MORE HAPPENING IN THE PAST 5 YEARS THAN IN THE LAST 25 YEARS”.
EU DELEGATION IN KYIV

Reform pressure has yielded first results

In the past five years, civil society and international actors have jointly achieved progress that some five years ago no-one would have deemed possible. While civil society has pushed for reforms from below, international actors have employed pressure from above. This strategy of countering vested interests from two directions is

¹ USAID/Pact (2019): USAID/ENGAGE National Civic Engagement Poll. Fieldwork: November 1- December 4, 2018.

² Transparency International (2018): Corruption Perception Index 2018. Accessed 03-07-19, from <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2018>.

³ USAID/Pact (2019): USAID/ENGAGE National Civic Engagement Poll. Fieldwork: November 1- December 4, 2018.

occasionally referred to as “the sandwich”⁴. It has achieved notable results: Over a million public servants have disclosed their assets, the public procurement market has increased by 35%⁵, and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) was implemented as part of a larger institutional structure to tackle corruption. The bureau is frequently criticised for not having achieved convictions in any major corruption cases so far. Nonetheless, its defenders argue that NABU’s greatest achievement is its mere existence, which has been enforced despite consistent pushbacks from the Poroshenko administration. This achievement demonstrates that change is underway, even if it is happening at a slow pace.

The gap between reform progress and its perception creates demands for quick and easy fixes

Despite the ongoing struggle to implement change, the public judges reform success by tangible results. A student from Kyiv explains that in theory he can acknowledge the work that has been done so far. However, when driving to his grandparents’ village on roads that have not been repaired in 30 years, he does not feel that change is happening in Ukraine. While people need to look closely to see the progress that has been made, shortcomings are clearly visible. The gap between perception and reality has diminished the enthusiasm and hopefulness that followed the revolution. Instead, impatience has spread and filled the air with a desire for meaningful change. This desire was expressed in the recent election of the comedian and political newcomer Zelensky as President. His landslide victory shook Ukrainian politics to its core. What now remains for Zelensky is the challenge to implement the expected change.

Efforts to implement change are complicated by a system of rigid structures and interests that seems to be resistant towards revolutions. There is no simple way to overcome this system. Meeting demands for quick and easy fixes can be tempting and may cause policy makers to focus on smaller issues and reforms that are easy to agree upon. Although tackling such matters is indispensable and might help to create an image of a dynamic reform process, focusing on easy reforms will prove short-sighted in the long-run. You cannot fix a country with zip ties. They might be easy to use and provide quick solutions. Still, the drive for profound change and will to tackle decisive and deep-rooted issues must remain. Against the backdrop of current political developments, Tomenko’s warning of impatience is certainly justified and should cause policy makers in Ukraine serious concern. To mitigate frustration, closing the gap between perceptions and the actual reform progress should therefore be at the heart of any future reform endeavours. It will be a crucial precondition for ensuring the long-term endurance needed for a successful transition.

⁴ Nitsova, Silviya; Pop-Eleches, Grigore; Graeme, Robertson (2018): Revolution and Reform in Ukraine. Evaluating Four Years of Reform. PONARS Eurasia.

⁵ Nitsova, Silviya; Pop-Eleches, Grigore; Graeme, Robertson (2018): Revolution and Reform in Ukraine. Evaluating Four Years of Reform. PONARS Eurasia.