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## **UKRAINIAN DEMOCRACY AND THE WAY TO EUROPEAN UNION**

Once Ukraine was the flagship country of the Eastern Partnership and the testing ground for the EU's policy in its eastern neighbors. By the end of 2012 year Ukraine was expected to have a model Association Agreement with the EU that would show the way for other countries. Its "deep and comprehensive" free trade area, in addition to the classical removal of trade barriers, would have provided for massive approximation of Ukraine's legislation to that of the EU and de-facto integration of the post-communist country into the EU's common economic and legal space. Today, with the Polish Presidency of the Council, the European Union came to an end and the Euro crisis is looming; the Ukrainian authorities are rapidly losing the chance to put Ukraine back on track toward a closer relationship with the EU by demonstrating their respect for the European values.

For many, the political choice of President Yanukovich seems rational. Ukrainian big business, which stand behind President Yanukovich, has a clear interest in gaining access to EU markets. The Ukrainian economy is export-oriented; its domestic market has already become too small for its own tycoons. Thus, a free trade area with the EU under the new Association Agreement corresponds to their interests. Here, however, lies the fundamental dilemma for the ruling Party of Regions: on the one hand, its instinctive desire to monopolize both political power and national economic assets; on the other, its interest to liberalize economic relations with the EU that requires transposing European standards of transparency, competition (both economic and political) and the rule of law.

The crisis in relations with the EU sparked a debate in Ukraine on possible alternative options of (re-)integration with Russia. However, playing the Russian card and old "multi-vectored" foreign policy declarations from 1990s merely hide the real "semi-vectored" foreign policy of the current Ukrainian leadership. Its major goal is

not to integrate with both EU and Russia simultaneously, but to secure non-interference from both Brussels and Moscow.

While the business community's interests of getting access to the EU common market will not be served by halting the Association Agreement process, it is Ukrainian society that loses the most if the Agreement does not materialize. Under the Agreement, the Ukrainian government would be legally obligated to approximate national legislation to that of the EU, i.e., introducing European standards on a wide spectrum of issues from public procurement and the environment to consumer protection and state subsidy rules.

Civil society reacted to the crisis in EU-Ukraine relations by mobilizing and demanding better governance and democratic practices. In September, October, and November 2011, the International Renaissance Foundation, the Ukrainian Platform of the Civil Society Forum of Eastern Partnership, and the Civic Expert Council were joined by hundreds of NGOs and activists in their appeal to EU leaders and Ukrainian authorities to initiate the Association Agreement as soon as possible. They argued that the failure to do it in the near future will deprive Ukrainians from having a sense of real European prospects extremely important leverage for citizens to be able to advocate for their fundamental rights and freedoms. In their view, an initiated and published Association Agreement will be an important tool for the Ukrainian civil society to generate public demand for reforms and put pressure on the government to undertake the necessary changes.

A new civic movement "We Are Europeans" was launched in October 2011, when hundreds of Facebook users gathered at the Parliament with pro-European slogans. Civil society has managed to get its message across to the Ukrainian mass media and the EU institutions. Recent public opinion polls also show that European ideas and identity have taken roots in Ukrainian society. For example, a November 2011 poll by the Razumkov Center shows, for the first time in a number of years, that the number of those who are in favor of integration with EU (44 %) is considerably higher than those in favor of integration with Russia (31 %).

In order to support the pro-European mood in society, the EU should agree to initiate and disclose the text of the Association Agreement with Ukraine – regardless of behavior of its current political leadership. Without publishing the text, Ukrainian society will remain unaware of what is, in fact, at stake and what concrete benefits could be gained – or indeed lost – without the Agreement. Civil society needs the Association Agreement as a tool with which it is possible to increase public pressure on Ukrainian decision-makers to commit to European values and accept the EU's political demands.

The official signing and ratification of the Agreement, however, should be made conditional on Ukraine's compliance with democratic standards in the October 2012 parliamentary elections. Ukrainian civil society is determined and able to play a major role in boosting demand for free and fair elections leading to a more accountable and democratic governance. Meanwhile, civil society's campaign for fair elections and efforts to shape a positive pro-European political agenda need help from the outside. By making its association and free trade offer —but at the same time conditional on the compliance with European values and the pursuit of the fair elections – the EU will help strengthen the push for a democratic change in Ukraine from within.

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