

402

APRIL
2016IN UKRAINE, NO PANIC OVER THE
DUTCH “NO”**Anna Korbut**, Editor of The Ukrainian Week

When asked what they thought about the Dutch referendum, the unanimous answer of a dozen of friends and colleagues was: “The results are disheartening. But our main goal is to reform the country. Things like this shouldn’t stop us.” This cold-headed reaction reveals a number of important aspects about constructive forces in Ukrainian society.

First of all, it shows that many Ukrainians, particularly young and mid-aged professionals, feel that they are the ones to “own” the process of transformations – they don’t blame those abroad for not supporting the country the way it is now. They do not expect outside forces like the EU or the US, or international organizations, to drive reforms and deliver a better life for them. In their eyes, the main responsibility for changes in the country is on Ukrainian politicians and themselves. The Association Agreement (AA) and the DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, a part of the Association Agreement) with the EU, as well as integration, are generally seen as a way to transform Ukraine into an efficient and citizen-friendly system based on the rule of law, rather than as a geopolitical goal in itself. There is actually a widespread understanding in Ukraine that such a goal is very far-fetched at best, given the current lack of appetite for enlargement in the EU, the challenges the Union is facing, the flaws of Ukraine as a state, and the widespread “Realpolitik” thinking whereby many of its European proponents deny Ukraine the right to its choice because of fear of Russia.

Second of all, the reaction in Ukraine was not of panic or disappointment. This can partly be explained by the fact that it was just one country that has stepped out against Ukraine’s aspirations for change so far, and the turnout was only slightly above 30%. But a more important contribution to this reaction came from the quality work of the media and NGOs in Ukraine who prepared the audience for the possible negative results. They have been following the process, explaining the reasons why the Dutch could vote against the Association Agreement, and generally covering the situation in the EU so that Ukrainians could understand the challenges they face there, and don’t feel alienated from the EU or the West in general after such an obstacle.

Third, the referendum once again gave Ukrainian activists and diplomats a platform for campaigning for change – this time, outside Ukraine. This is important

because it gives local actors experience in communicating Ukraine abroad, shows them what Europeans actually think of Ukraine, and what needs to be changed in order to be more successful in the future.

Of course, in some aspects the logic of voting against association seems quite puzzling to Ukrainians. Shortly before the referendum, an Ipsos poll revealed that 59% of respondents saw corruption as the main reason for a “No” vote. This is a legitimate concern widely shared by Ukrainians themselves. But the AA is seen here as one of the instruments to actually help Ukraine fight against corruption. And EU member states should already have resilient anti-corruption barriers in their legislative systems given their level of development. Unless, of course, they are willing to tolerate it – in forms, such as harboring dirty money from corrupt politicians and dictators of non-EU states. In that case, this is a problem for them to solve, not for Ukraine.

It is also likely that many Dutch and European citizens in EU member-states in general fear that the AA is the first step towards Ukraine’s joining the EU. For Ukrainians, association is an instrument of reform which they see as crucial regardless of whether they are part of the EU someday or not.

If there is fear that closer ties between Ukraine and the EU could spur labour migration, this is hardly justified as well. A visa-free regime allows short-term visits with no right to work in EU member states. Moreover, Ukrainians, Moldovans or Georgians heading to the visa-free countries have to show all kinds of proofs that they will not stay beyond the allowed term – from return tickets to documents proving reservation of accommodation, purpose of visit, financial sustainability and so on. Meanwhile, Ukrainians who want to leave as a result of a difficult economic situation, have always found a legal way through without waiting for any kind of agreements, and will continue to do so. However, the quality of migration seems to be changing now. Back in the 1990s and 2000s, the first waves of labour migration from Ukraine were comprised of mid-aged people who went abroad and stayed there as illegal migrants, and only later obtained necessary papers when the systems in their host countries allowed so. They were mostly working in the non-qualified service sector. Today’s migration is often comprised of young people who go to study abroad and stay there, or leave as trained IT developers or scientists who look for better options. If the situation in Ukraine improves, there will be fewer motivations for them to leave. That is one of the purposes of the AA as well.

The explanation of the “No” vote that puzzles Ukrainians the most is the one coming from the likes of Nigel Farage, the leader of UKIP, who actively supported the referendum in the Netherlands. “Let’s celebrate the outbreak of democracy in this country,” he said in an address to the voters on a visit to the Netherlands. If democracy is a vote for isolationist policies, restriction of civil and economic freedoms and prevalence of “orbit of influence” thinking, then it is very different from the way many in Ukraine and, hopefully, in the EU see and value it.

At the same time– and this is important to emphasize– the referendum has shown how many supporters and friends Ukraine has gained in the past two years both among Western diplomats working here, and among politicians and experts abroad. Their efforts and commitment prevent the sentiment of alienation from the West that events like the Dutch referendum could spur in Ukrainian society.