



BULLETIN

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Building Awareness about the EU in Ukraine

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Euromaidan and the prolonged crisis in eastern Ukraine have led to an increase in support for the EU among Ukrainians and have shown how dangerous it was for the EU and Ukrainian authorities to neglect an information campaign. For 23 years, the independent state has paid no attention to the role of dialogue inside the country. A significant part of the population of eastern Ukraine believe their countrymen from the western part are fascists, and that the European Union could be a threat to their own traditions and beliefs. At the same time, Russian propaganda, although based on incorrect messages, is very effective. Therefore, an information campaign coming from the EU, but organised in cooperation with Ukrainian partners, can now play an important role.

Public Support for the EU. Interest in the EU, and support for closer cooperation with it, is changing, according to data from the Razumkov Research Centre. It fluctuated between 26% and 40% in the period 2002–2011, while at the same time between 30% and 48% backed integration with Russia. The new Eastern Partnership initiative was a chance to increase interest in the EU and build wider support for closer ties. However, former president Viktor Yanukovich and his associates, despite declaring openness to the EU and support for many European reforms, showed no interest in informing Ukrainians about the union, or in any public discussion about the social consequences of the Association Agreement.

Lack of information to the public, already long exposed to Russian propaganda, resulted not only in the spread of disinformation about the EU but also provoked anti-EU and anti-western Ukrainian feelings. Events that occurred after Euromaidan contributed to an increase in support for the EU, which in late April was 52.4%. However, opinion is divided on whether it is better to strive for integration with the EU, or in the framework of the Eurasian Union. In the western part of the country, nearly 90% of Ukrainians favour integration with the EU, in the centre, support is around two-thirds, while in the south it is only close to 30%. The east is least enthusiastic about Europe. There, only one in four people would like to see Ukraine as part of the EU, while nearly 38% support the Eurasian Union. Due to historical experience and mobility, the EU often finds greater favour among the young and better educated. However, among many factors, a region of residence remains the strongest differentiator.

The media plays a particularly important role in disseminating information, and studies show that television is the main source of news for 95% of Ukrainians. In the west of the country, the Ukrainian-speaking majority watches Ukrainian TV and stations from neighbouring countries, including Poland. Further to the east, the population becomes progressively Russian-speaking, and Russian television dominates. Moreover, almost all stations there are controlled by the elite, who favour pro-Russian separatists. However, even in the past, well-funded and attractive Russian TV, with colourful programmes showing an image of a wealthy Russia, attracted more viewers than Ukrainian TV.

Previous Actions. The Delegation of the European Union in Kiev plays a special role in informing Ukrainians about the EU. The prospect of signing an Association Agreement enhanced the promotion of mutual relations. In the spring of 2013, the delegation announced competitions for partners in a wider information campaign, and joint activities with those selected were planned for 12 months, starting in autumn 2013. The delegation dedicated about €1 million every year EU promotion. “EU Study Days in Ukraine” have been developed to address students, and, as part of the “Building Europe in Ukraine” project, various activities have been prepared for other groups. There are meetings with experts from the delegation and from universities and media, who present current issues of bilateral relations, as well as training for the media. There are also “cultural street events” for the wider public, encouraging passers-by to take

an interest in issues related to Ukraine's relationship with the EU. In recent years several information centres have been launched throughout Ukraine. Although they are created mainly in academic centres, they aim to promote European integration to different groups.

The current activities were designed in the first half of 2013, in a different political situation, when there was much debate about whether Ukraine would sign an Association Agreement, under apparent pressure from Russia. However, there was no awareness of separatist movements and a society so strongly polarised. The decision not to sign the agreement, and all subsequent events throughout Ukraine, should prompt a re-evaluation of the content and methods of communication.

The Message: The EU as a Catalyst of the State. Informing the public about the EU is a very difficult process, even in Member States. The Polish experience shows how difficult it is to talk about the union in a way that interests the audience and give them basic information. Issues related to the functioning of the EU, the EU institutions and the decision-making process are complex, so it is most important to commit to building a long-term information strategy. Now, once again, the prospect of an Association Agreement and EU-backed reforms should take precedence.

Experiences of other countries show how important it is to match the message to a specific recipient. This applies to both the content and form of the message, and to the sender. Public opinion studies should be helpful here. TV is still a very important medium for most people, especially the elderly, but internet, and especially social media, should be used in order to reach out to younger generations.

In Poland, the big problem was in reaching the rural population, while in Ukraine, the message needs to be tailored according to region. In central Ukraine and in the west, the message may be more about the need for reform and the European Union, while in the east, the role of the EU as a stabilising influence conducive to the integrity of the country should be emphasised. The economy should be an important element of the campaign, and the improving situation of the Central European and Baltic States, backed by specific data such as GDP growth, would be an important and persuasive argument for Ukrainians from all over the country. The message should show the history of difficult reforms, together with the positive and negative consequences of EU membership. It should be emphasised that the EU can now help with changes that, although not bringing immediate improvement, are crucial in the long-term perspective—a perspective in which Russia should not be the enemy. Highlighting the long-term economic benefits is also important as a counterweight to Russian propaganda, which, using data from EU Member States, has convinced Ukrainians that the economic situation in these countries deteriorated after the introduction of reforms.

The Methods of Operation. It is difficult to organise the debate and encourage people to participate in informative and educational events, when they fear for the integrity of their country and for their personal safety. However, the assumption of the present government is to sign the trade part of the Association Agreement, and to implement reforms with the help of the EU as soon as possible. It is therefore a very good moment for an information campaign.

Yet persuading Ukrainians to take a positive view of the EU is not a task that can be undertaken only from outside. The Ukrainian government should send a clear message and organise specific information campaigns. In the campaigns carried out in other countries in the pre-accession period, local leaders, individuals and celebrities played an important role. Not only do Ukrainians not trust politicians, but an especially respected or popular person is more credible than an "official" when talking about positive, though distant effects of necessary reforms. In the referendum campaigns in Poland and Croatia, famous actors argued for European integration.

There are several key groups for the campaign. One of them includes representatives of national and local media. Some of them are already convinced by the argument for integration, but they need support. One proven way is to organise study trips to EU countries, where journalists could explore their realities and prepare programmes about the EU.

Campaigns organised by the EU delegation are generally based on information points, meetings with various social groups, discussions and publications. Yet such activities risk "preaching to the converted," reaching out primarily to those at academic centres and in large cities, who are already convinced about the EU. Local and central government involvement is also important, as happens already in other countries of the Eastern Partnership. Both Georgia and Moldova use materials and benefit from substantive support of the EU delegation staff, in order to conduct their own activities. The Ukrainian government, upon deciding to carry out reform stemming from the Association Agreement, must inform society and encourage the media to engage in such a project.

Preparing for association with the EU lasts for years. Through joint projects, often financed from EU funds, representatives of NGOs, local authorities, and universities can get to know about EU Member States and share this knowledge throughout Ukraine. It is important that sections of society that are already convinced be used in the campaign. The other need is for a long-term strategy for information and education, which will be an important element in the process of European integration. The EU delegation should act as coordinator, but only a broader campaign involving many stakeholders will help Ukrainians to understand what the EU is, why it is a success story, and how to avoid falling for Russian propaganda.