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Main takeaways from travels to the East and South of Ukraine

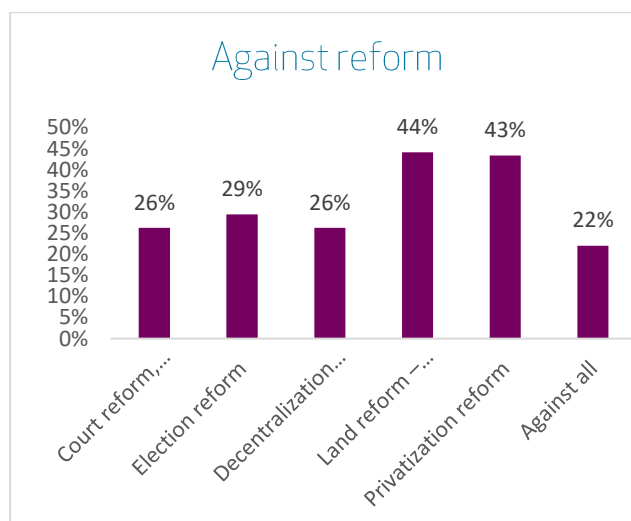
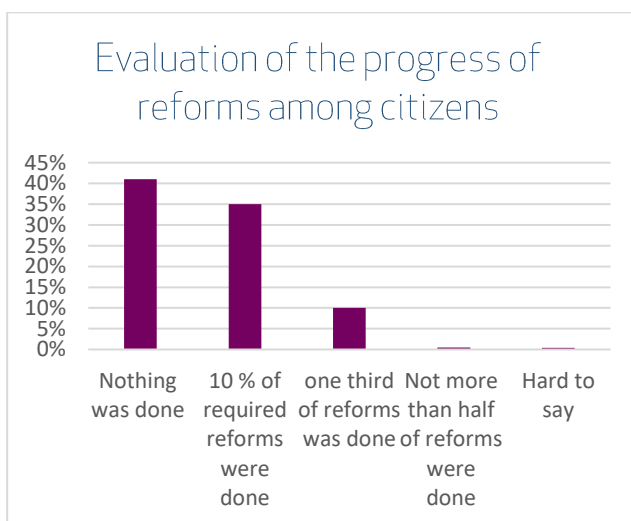
Dates: 26 February - 01 March 2018

Cities: Kramatorsk, Severodonetsk, Mariupol, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson

Within its campaign of presenting new grant opportunities USAID/ENGAGE team made five regional trips, and conducted quantitative research (mini-poll), interviewed experts and held public discussions in Eastern and Southern oblasts with the aim to identify the most crucial problems in the development of local communities and state of the regional civil society.

Attitude to the Reforms

There is widespread distrust and fatigue with political leadership, political parties, and the reform process in Ukraine among general population. Majority of citizens indicate that they are not satisfied with the pace of reforms (graph 1). Moreover, according to Pact's National Poll (graph 2) for each reform, there is a sizable portion of the population who are ultimately against their implementation. 26% are against court/anti-corruption reform and 29% are against election reform. About a half of the population is against land and privatization reforms, and one in five (22%) are against all five reforms. The number of people willing to make personal sacrifices for the reform process has fallen as well. Specifically, those willing to endure a decline in living standards for the sake of reform has fallen in the last three years. In 2015, it was 27%, but now in 2018 it sits at 19%.



Main reasons why reform progress is not obvious to ordinary Ukrainians, could be found not in the reforms *per se*, but more attached to the current economic and social situation, as well as the lack of credible political alternatives. People often don't understand the substance of reforms or don't see them addressing their high-priority needs. Reanimation Package of Reforms - coalition which has been deeply engaged in the reform process - admits that mechanisms for reform's implementation at regional level were not elaborated and doubled with insufficient local expertise and trade-unions' silence (especially in Healthcare and Education spheres) caused such an extremely low assessment of reform process among wide citizenry.

Donetsk and Luhansk regions used to be densely populated, industrial areas of Ukraine. As a result of the conflict much of the social infrastructure and large industrial enterprises remained in the territory that was not controlled by Ukraine. Military actions, migration, informational influence from the Russian Federation and ORDLOs, loss of economic potential have a particularly negative impact on the region as a whole and on communities living in territories controlled by the Ukrainian government near the clash line¹. The reduction of income of households combined with public sense of impossibility of a rapid stabilization of the socio-economic situation in the Donbass gave ground to general frustration among region inhabitants.

Thus, dissatisfaction with reforms at the national level is especially evident in the regions.

According to the mini-poll which was conducted during regional trips, citizens of four cities (Kramatorsk, Severodonetsk, Mariupol, Zaporizhzhia) identified fighting corruption (75%), war in Donbas (45%) and easiness of doing business (40%) as the most urgent unresolved issues for Ukraine today. Concerning their personal problems in the current situation, respondents pointed to a different pattern of primary threats: deepening of the economic crisis (71%), increase in prices for housing and utilities (51%), and inefficient healthcare system (41%). This data also correlates with other surveys, including the second wave of our Civic Engagement Poll, which found that 57% of Ukrainians consider the difficult economic situation as a major problem. To put it bluntly in the context of Eastern and Southern oblasts the main question is what will be industrial transformation of the region if conflict won't be resolved on the basis of return of the pre-existing manufacturing capacities.

Apart from that, in Kramatorsk and Severodonetsk activists that have been interviewed complained on enormous fiscal burden, which demotivate people of private entrepreneurship, and state, which considered more as a predator. These cities excepted a lot of IDPs that generated quite sound discontent with local inhabitants because of increased burden on infrastructure: house rent, hospitals, kindergartens and schools. On the other hand, IDPs having been posed in precarious conditions, gave big impetus to the development of the small businesses and enhanced local civil society.

Logistic is another challenge, especially actual for Luhansk oblast. Even in Severodonetsk, which became an oblast center after the conflict broke out, and Mariupol, there are a lot of feelings among the people that they were forgotten in comparison with Kramatorsk. Many locals have never traveled outside their oblast so they tend to be less open to the anything new - be it reforms or IDPs.

¹ Громадяни і держава на підконтрольних територіях Донецької та Луганської області Проблеми, виклики, бачення майбутнього – УНЦПД та International Alert - жовтень 2017 р

Kherson oblast, is particularly exposed to immigration with the youth is leaving for abroad as there are very few job opportunities in the place. Economically because of its geographical proximity to the Crimea, Kherson oblast was very tied on the peninsula economically. After Crimea annexation, no substitution has happened or reorientation of the businesses. It's also the reason why people are preoccupied with survival most of the time. There is also very strong paternalistic moods and Soviet times nostalgia, as a lot of people expect decisions to be made in Kyiv. Populism is flourishing. Powerful broadcast tower was installed in Crimea by Russia covers with its TV broadcasting Kherson oblast as well and increases the level of frustration with Kyiv-based government.

General conclusions on the basis of quantitative research are confirmed by the discussions with regional experts. Among the main reasons that, in the experts' point of view, make ineffectiveness of the reforms and changes, the following most often are referred to:

- Little reaction of the authorities to the demand of local communities to create favorable conditions for business and economic development (infrastructure) and to fix fiscal pressure (Severodonetsk, Kherson, Mariupol)
- Limited political rotation – those previously affiliated with Party of Regions or Communist Party are still in power under the different political umbrella. They accustomed to abuse power with impunity.
- Absence of results in fighting corruption, moreover corruption at all governmental levels referred to the conflict in Donbass.
- Monopolization of local media either by large industrial groups or regional authorities (VKontakte is popular, Facebook is not)

Citizen's activism

According Civic Engagement Poll, 19 per cent of residents of East and 15 per cent of the South know at least one type of civil initiative. For those, initiatives that address people's personal interests or needs directly possess the biggest potential for engagement. In other words, people look for an activism agenda that targets very specific, narrow issues, not some transformational goals. It's particularly vivid, given that majority of respondents in the East and South oblasts don't understand how CSOs can influence the activities of governmental bodies.

For example, in Severodonetsk the public councils are gathering, but there is no culture of discussion and mediation is highly required. Widespread idea there is that oligarch Rinat Akhmetov – is a savior of the region and he is not underlie criticism. The same is true for Zaporizhzhia, which remains under significant control of the same financial and industrial groups (e.g. Metinvest holding / Zaporizhstal enterprise).

More than half of the working population of these cities work at factories and enterprises affiliated with large industrial groups. Any civic activity that affect the interests of those companies usually has no chances for further development. That's why citizen's participation in civil actions tend to be entirely politically neutral. As described in one recent survey *there is a peculiar regional tradition of limiting criticism of power and dependence on it, which is explained by the connection of power structures with city-based enterprises*.² In addition, decentralization in the region has not yet been

² Громадяни і держава на підконтрольних територіях Донецької та Луганської області Проблеми, виклики, бачення майбутнього – УНЦПД та International Alert - жовтень 2017 р

completed, and local communities lack the resources to solve local problems. Quite a new phenomenon, which in recent few years has been thriving in mines - if there is displeasure of workers with working conditions, they are immediately accused of separatism.

It creates the environment where issues of anti-corruption, ecology, roads and transport are silenced. According to locals, participation in civic oversight and monitoring is possible if it covers "safe" topics that are aimed at developing constructive solutions, rather than exposing activists to open confrontation with the authorities. Thus, citizens don't consider CSOs as a powerful instrument of influence on local authorities.

In Zaporizhzhia, apart from political and economic impact, major enterprises are engaging with the local civil society sector, by providing significant funding to it (up to a 100 000 hrivnia) per year. Most of these grants are targeting local infrastructure issues and lack civic oversight and monitoring components. As a result, number of quasi-CSOs are being operational under the influence of certain political interests, lacking genuine citizen engagement. The same is true in Mariupol, where businesses controlled by Rinat Akhmetov dominate also in political sphere and alternative civil initiatives are weak because they don't have access to media.

In light of above mentioned, measures of direct citizens influence (like rallies) are the less supported by people on the East and South. The communication in form of deliberation between citizens and authorities is not widespread also, given that decisions on hierarchical factories used to go from top to bottom and their formulation traditionally went without additional consultation with community. Only recently due to several civil initiatives like Stronger Communities people are becoming interested in participatory budgeting and advocating their rights related to houses and adjacent territories.

Networking and coalition's building

Public spaces (hubs) for meetings of local CSOs in the region became true places of concentration of creativity, education and urban activism. Among those - Khalabuda (Mariupol), Khochu-Budu (Severodonetsk), Vilna Khata (Kramatorsk), CSO Hub (Kramatorsk), UNDP CSO hub (Kramatorsk), Edison Space (Zaporizhzhia), Spilno Hub (Zaporizhzhia). Six from seven hubs were created by USAID OTI/UCBI, CSO Hub in Kramatorsk was created by NGO Forum. In 2016 the "Public Belt of Donbass" was formed. The agreement on cooperation was signed by representatives of the following organizations - NGO "Center for Joint Development Acting Community" (Starobelsk), NGO "Association for the Renaissance and Development" (Bakhmut), NGO "Agency of Support of Local Initiatives" (Mariupol), NGO "Nova Druzhkivka" (Druzhkivka), Donetsk regional organization "Committee of Voters of Ukraine" (Kramatorsk), NGO "Our community" (Kreminna), "Crisis media center Seversky Donets" (Severodonetsk). The purpose of the project was not only in transferring of knowledge and exchange of experience, but also in the creation and development of a strong coalition.

It must be emphasized that Donetsk and Lugansk region are different in terms of self-organization and activism. As civil activist V. Krasnopyorov put it, *"Donetsk region is already at a different stage of development. Luhansk region still lacks the understanding how to influence the authorities, how to exercise their rights... In the Donetsk region, too, there is a problem with qualitative activism, but not*

to such an extent. The biggest problem for Donetsk region is lack of unity among activists and cooperation with each other. By uniting, they can do a lot of serious transformations»³.

Given oblasts feature very low level of trust within local civil society. Many CSOs started their activities before the Revolution of Dignity and now are blamed in cooperation with ex-Party of Regions or *zlochynna vlada*. Those emerged not far ago on the wave of purge of government don't tend to cooperate with their predecessors. It undermines the opportunities for networking and coalition's building and combining the efforts around sharp political issues. **However, an independent external moderator can serve as driver and consolidating force for building networks and coalitions on the cities' level.**

In several cities of Donbas there is another problem – lack of human resources. Due to prolonged conflict, the region is hosting quite a significant share of international assistance and development programs. Key donors working in the region or organizing activities in the region are: NDI, IRI (Academy of political leadership, Young Political Leadership School), USAID OTI/UCBI, Karitas, GIZ, UNDP, UNICEF. Anybody who could show at least minimal organizational experience or knowledge of English were quickly absorbed by international organizations. Some local CSO got a good chance to step to the upper level (VostokSos, DonbasSos, Tochka Oporu). But those who left operate in low competitive environment. Some of the CSOs participants addressed USAID/ENGAGE asking to create a social network group for them, which can be a sign of patronizing legacy culture among local residents.

Kherson is, to the opposite, was out of attention from government and donors. Besides, big agricultural holdings are predominant type of business there and they are not interested in civil activism at all. In Kherson, the level of civil activism is particularly low. Locals rarely attend public meetings and do not participate in deliberation.

Finally, the picture won't be full without mentioning volunteer movement, which became effective embodiment of self-organizing potential of Donetsk and Luhansk and partially Kherson oblasts. After several years of unprecedented growth and support among the population, volunteering movement is declining. For almost four years volunteer activities have been like a good alternative to the insufficient public agencies, but the problem is that they were united around “storages”, not ideas. To stay effective civil entities will require from them reorientation toward protecting the rights of citizens and building coalitions around most crucial issues.

Conclusions:

There are several major obstacles for building strong local activism in Eastern and Southern oblasts:

- East and South regions are distinctly demonstrate that shaping of civic values is lingering due to domination of survival strategies for local citizens.
- Activists are polarized and lack mutual trust to address major social issues within their community. It, in turn, does not enable making strong coalitions around those issues;
- CSO are often under the influence of dominant businesses, they usually tend to follow

³ Ярошук О. Валентин Красноперов: Донбас – це наш «Дикий Схід». Він молодий, недосвідчений, але потенційний [Електронний ресурс] // Громадський простір. – 2016. – 11 серпня. – Режим доступу: <https://www.prostir.ua/?focus=valentyn-krasnopеров-donbas-tsenash-dykyj-shid-vin-molodyj-nedosvidchenyj-ale-potentsijnyj>

- established tradition of political neutrality;
- Communication among local activists in the regions, both online and off-line, is considerably less developed than in major cities, resulting in lower levels of consolidation and mobilization.

To overcome these deficiencies, two major steps are recommended:

- Local activists need extensive civic education programs to address a wide range of specific questions: what is social activism and how does it relate to political actions; what tools should be used by social activists to promote their agenda. General population should be addressed with informal activities to tackle paternalism and inoculate individual activism;
- Civil society activists outside of major cities need advice and technical support to develop local networks of activists, to provide the necessary framework for agenda-setting and planning of events. More strategic aim should focus on mentoring them to work not for survival, but for project sustainability.