

Ukraine Suffers From Too Much Democracy

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Many Western analysts believe that too much power in too few hands is the main problem of the post-Soviet space. To protect more authoritarian "Russias" from emerging in the region, thinkers actively advocate inclusiveness, participation and democratization. So powerful is this conviction that these three words have become a panacea against whatever disease a country has.

Economist Friedrich Hayek labeled this phenomenon a "fatal conceit": a scholarly tendency to treat certain formal institutions as the perfect answer to any problem. However, Ukraine's problem is not overly concentrated authority. In fact, Russia's authoritarianism and Ukraine's unsustainable democracy suffer from the same core problem: an enormous weakness of state.

Decentralization has been advocated by many analysts as a perfect treatment for Ukraine's dysfunctional government. Ukraine's current political system, which reverted to the 2004 constitution after former President Viktor Yanukovich fled the country, is as decentralized and dispersed as one can get.

Most decision-making is coalition-based and the political leadership has at least three power centers: president, prime minister, and parliament. These three institutions, which also represent different social strata, create a balanced power structure. The revolution on Kiev's Maidan Square also brought to power a wide variety of individuals with broad popular support.

But rather than resulting in universal happiness, the outcome of such power dispersion is deadlock. Although Ukraine is in desperate need of reforms, none of its political groups are strong enough to push them through.

Under Yanukovich, the presidency had a considerable amount of power. The reinstated 2004 constitution, by contrast, gives the parliament the upper hand and makes the president responsible only for defense and foreign policy. Economic policy and Cabinet members are chosen and managed by the parliament. There is a clear logic to this because such a system prevents power from concentrating in the hands of the president or the parliament alone.

But the system also prevents the government from achieving any meaningful policy, which Ukraine urgently needs. The poor relationship between former President Viktor Yushchenko and former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko was a product of this imbalance in power.

But today's reality is even worse because the current Ukrainian parliament, a legacy of Yanukovich's rule, is made up of conservative, populist and reform-resistant deputies, some of them controlled by Putin.

There is little that Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, brought to power by the Maidan revolution, can do in such a situation. In the last few months the parliament has consistently blocked most of his proposals, passing only about a dozen out of hundreds of decrees. Tensions became so high that Yatsenyuk recently had to threaten to resign in order to get parliament to agree to a planned increase of natural resource taxes.

The Cabinet is also split between officials from Yanukovich's time and those brought to power by the democratic revolution. Those in the latter group, such as Economic Minister Pavlo Sheremeta, lack ministerial experience and, despite their charismatic personalities, are unable to impact reforms in any meaningful way.

The third actor in the system is the newly elected Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. Although Poroshenko is deprived of any meaningful economic power under the new constitution, Ukrainian society paradoxically expects him to fix the economy.

Ukrainian society united in an unprecedented way to elect Poroshenko, with all voting Ukrainian regions supporting his candidacy unanimously and without a run-off. The mandate Ukrainians granted him, however, cannot be implemented because he lacks the constitutional authority to influence economic policy, form a team or deal with parliament effectively.

Hence the very political institutions that are designed to avoid power concentration result in a political deadlock, in which president, prime minister and parliament are unable to implement urgently needed economic changes.

Respected Polish reformer Leszek Balcerowicz has suggested that once the opportunity

window for reforms is open, the government needs to implement reforms within half a year maximum. But although five months have already passed since Yanukovich was ousted from the presidency, no reforms have taken place. If anything, Kakha Bendukidze, the author of successful Georgian reforms invited to Ukraine as a member of the advisory group to the Ministry of Economy, has just left Ukraine disillusioned with the government's inability to implement any change.

Now add to this equation the geopolitical reality in which Ukraine's leadership operates. Parts of the country are controlled by self-interested oligarchs who block the very few economic laws that Prime Minister Yatsenyuk has been trying to pass through the parliament. Other parts of the country are controlled by Russia-funded rebels, who have succeeded in fully absorbing the attention of Ukrainian society and left the reform agenda far behind. The regional tensions make Ukrainian leadership even less willing to implement any reforms.

The situation could change in fall 2014 after Ukrainians re-elect a new parliament and if President Poroshenko's party is able to put its own prime minister in power.

But this assumption is dependent on too many unknown variables. Putin is intent on destabilizing Ukraine's southeast, Poroshenko's popularity is slowly declining, and Ukrainians are already frustrated with a seemingly never-ending war and lack of political change.

Furthermore, even under the most optimistic scenario, the parliamentary elections in fall, the time needed to form a new Cabinet, and the winter holidays will delay the debate on reforms till next spring. A full year will have passed since the Maidan revolution before any reforms are even discussed, considerably past Balcerowicz's six months advice. By that time the window of opportunity — the momentum for reforms — will be long gone.

Ukraine's example illustrates the perils of power dispersion in weak, developing countries. As post-Soviet experiences reveal, countries that lack universal support for reforms often have a hard time achieving change without a certain degree of power concentration. A strong executive authority, by contrast, is able to achieve at least partial social consolidation around reforms and weaken the political hand of the potential reforms' losers. That was the role Yeltsin played in Russia, and Saakashvili in Georgia.

The potential downside of such power concentration, of course, is a Russia-style dictatorial system with no reforms and extensive abuses of power.

But the risks of becoming a second Russia should not stop Ukraine from strengthening its reform-oriented leadership. Saakashvili's Georgia managed to pass between Russia's Scylla and Ukraine's Charybdis and implement successful reforms. Ukraine's new government should follow his example, even if, as the investigation recently begun against Saakashvili shows, no good deeds ever go unpunished.

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