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Ukraine: A Democracy In Need

Democratization process in Ukraine must remain driven by the people of Ukraine

Yulia Tymoshenko was calm but firm. After spending another gruelling day in the courtroom, the opposition leader in Ukraine insisted the European Union should, by the end of the year, sign an Association Agreement with her archrivals in the government of President Viktor Yanukovich. The accord would establish free trade with the community and make possible visa-free travel to member countries for Ukrainians. It will be a boost for her opponents in power, but the benefits for 46 million Ukrainians are more important than that, she said during a meeting in the Batkivshchyna Party headquarters in Kyiv on 6 July.

Standing trial on several charges, Yulia Tymoshenko is the leading figure among several members of the previous government facing prosecution in judicial proceedings widely criticized as politically motivated. The government in Kyiv emphatically denies this, but key European bodies and the US-based Freedom House have expressed deep concern that the trials are sapping Ukraine's democracy and its prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Against this backdrop, the NATO-Ukraine Interparliamentary Council held its regular biannual session in Kyiv on 5 July. Established as a platform for joint parliamentary oversight of progress in NATO-Ukraine relations, the Council listens to high-ranking politicians and diplomats, prominent scholars and independent observers. To the disappointment of the Allies' parliamentary members, this time leading government ministers and Presidential officials declined to appear before the joint body. The session was followed the next day by a meeting of the Assembly's Subcommittee on Democratic Governance, which asked Senator Lucio Malan of Italy to prepare a report on the current developments in Ukraine. The deliberations in Kyiv ended with the **following conclusions**:

A Freedom House report reduced Ukraine's status from "free" to "partially free" based on developments in 2010. However the country's rating slipped only by one point (from 5 to 6). The British ambassador to Ukraine [Leigh Turner](#) noted that these two facts mean that while the trend of the democratic development is disquieting, "there is everything still to play for and – I hope – that Ukraine can restore its position in the "free" category next year." It is a critical time, and the Euro-Atlantic community must redouble its efforts to support democratic processes in Ukraine, particularly since internal and foreign policies are tightly interconnected. It is worth recalling that, when seeking European integration, President Kuchma was left internationally isolated with nowhere to turn but Moscow, because of a bad human rights record and weapon sales to rogue states.

The threat to democracy is real in Ukraine, even if President Yanukovich's allegiance to Moscow is weaker than some may think. Comparisons to Belarus are legitimate – Lukashenko maintains a certain independence from Moscow, which has no great love for him, but he still has nowhere else to turn because he maintains an authoritarian system. Given Ukraine's size and diversity, Yanukovich will never be able to exert as much power over his country as Lukashenko does in Belarus, but he is leading Ukraine in that direction.

Engagement with Yanukovich's Ukraine, not isolation, is a smart policy. Ukraine's relations with Russia are broad and complex by nature. It should not face a black and white choice between east and west – this divides the country. Despite its steps backwards, Ukraine remains freer than its neighbors Russia and Belarus. Ukraine will be in the spotlight at the Euro 2012 football tournament and Yanukovich will find it harder to resist international pressure to abide by democratic standards and values in the months leading up to the event. The Euro-Atlantic community should use this opportunity to support democratic processes in Ukraine. While NATO should maintain good relations with Ukraine, as it has thus far with Yanukovich's administration despite the switch to a "non-aligned" policy, member states will need to decide whether to take measures to counter growing authoritarianism.

Although supported by the international community, the democratization process in Ukraine must remain driven by the people of Ukraine. Political forces and civic organisations need to enhance their dialogue in order to shape an optimal and enduring framework of rules and practices that would, on the one hand, make the decision-making process more efficient and evade the deadlocks of the "Orange" era, and on the other hand, avoid the excessive concentration of power in the hands of a few. Coupled with full respect for human rights and liberties and a fair election process, this framework would lay the foundation for a strong, European and successful Ukraine. Encouragement lies in opinion surveys in Ukraine, which show the younger and more educated respondents supporting a democratic and independent path for Ukraine – statistics that bode well for the country's European future.

Bio

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