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How ready is Ukrainian society to accept European values?

Progressive laws alone will not transform Ukraine into a country free of prejudice and discrimination. Much more needs to be changed

The war launched by Russia has brought thousands of deaths, the occupation of Ukrainian territory and the destruction of entire towns in its wake. Against the backdrop of these tragedies, Ukraine has made a huge leap in the direction of the European Union – a move towards a future, the dream of which had already reached the point of no return for the entire country in 2013.

Once Ukraine had been given a genuine prospect of becoming an EU candidate country, progress was suddenly made on issues which had literally been discussed for years with no resolution. For example, on 7 June 2022, the Ukrainian government supported the legalisation of medical cannabis – and the corresponding bill is now already being reviewed by parliament. Then, on the 20 June, the Ukrainian parliament ratified the Istanbul Convention – the adoption of which had been in the pipeline for the last 11 years.

Just three days later, on 23 June, Ukraine was granted EU candidate status. The European Union laid out a slew of demands, warning that failure to fulfil these conditions might spark retaliatory actions, which might even go as far as revoking the country's candidate status. The EU has repeatedly emphasised that the further development of Ukraine would have to include progress in the fields of human rights and the establishment of democratic institutions.

It will take time to accept change

'Overall, when it comes to the political criteria, Ukraine is well advanced in reaching the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities',
– reported Ursula von der Leyen at a press conference in Brussels on 17 June, the eve of the historic decision granting Ukraine EU candidate

status.

It was probably precisely this wave of events that was the catalyst for several petitions, quite revolutionary for a post-Soviet country, to appear on the Ukrainian president's website.

On 3 June, a petition for the legalisation of single sex marriage was registered. This was not the first petition of its kind, but the difference this time was that it managed to collect more than the 25 thousand signatures required to be reviewed by Vladimir Zelensky. Around a month later, on 4 July, a petition on the legalisation of pornography and erotica was also posted. So far, the petition already has more than 15 thousand signatures and has sparked lively debate in the mass media and on social networks.

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Another scandalous move was the poll, launched on the government web portal *Diia*, on gun ownership. The poll showed that around 59 percent of Ukrainians voted in favour of allowing people to carry firearms for self-defence.

In light of this, Ukraine, an EU candidate country, now seems like a European dream for anyone with liberal views and a complete nightmare for those with more conservative ones. Ukraine, with its single sex marriage, access to medical cannabis, criminal sanctions for domestic violence, legal operation of the porn industry and a shotgun in every home. For some reason, some associated issues like this with 'European values', and others with 'the Wild West'. Many believed that adopting such laws, which for Ukraine are very progressive, would inevitably change the country beyond all recognition and, with the wave of a magic wand, turn it into a flourishing country, free of prejudice and discrimination.

In reality, the process of European integration is really not as fast as it might seem in view of the speed at which events are unfolding today. To strengthen what we call European values in Ukraine could take years. And a lot more needs to be changed – adopting a law on single sex marriage or the Istanbul Convention will simply not be enough.

Reforms must be accompanied with popular involvement

Among the conditions the EU has set if Ukraine is to keep its status as a candidate country are the fight against corruption and the oligarchy, as well as reform of the judiciary. Regarding the latter, it seems as though Ukraine has got its work cut out for it, because this process has been artificially obstructed for years now. New legislation must become a protective shield for new laws, because the introduction of any norms and rules cannot function properly without a clearly defined and understood regulatory basis – to prevent 'loopholes' in the laws and ambiguity in the language.

Yet another layer of problems stems from the unwillingness of society to make such fundamental changes in such a short time. Some decisions continue to face opposition from certain segments of the population – such as the, Istanbul Convention, which uses the word 'gender' – a term that is incomprehensible to many Ukrainians. Or the legalisation of medical cannabis for recreational purposes, which many mistakenly see as the complete legalisation of soft drugs and are thus against it.

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Frequently the reason people fear something new is because they lack proper knowledge about the subject of discussion. This means that, alongside advancing the reforms themselves, the Ukrainian authorities also have to work with the population. Information campaigns, articles in the media, public statements by the country's leading personalities must be aimed at debunking myths and explaining these very same reforms: why change is needed, what these changes based on, and what exactly is going to change in reality. The best way of helping people understand this is by appealing to personal experience: each and every Ukrainian citizen must understand how these new reforms will affect them individually. For example, should we find ourselves facing a serious illness such as cancer or epilepsy, each and every one of us would have access to a unique medication based on natural ingredients: cannabinoids, which reduce spasms and help alleviate pain.

Staying realistic

Another important aspect is the need to introduce pro-European reforms at all levels, from the capital city to the smallest villages, taking into account regional characteristics. After all, attitudes in the progressive city of Kyiv may very well differ from those in, say a small town somewhere in Lviv oblast – a region which has its own specific religious character. Public relations work must always be careful and seamless. It is important to bear in mind that even if the new laws are passed by the Verkhovna Rada (the Ukrainian parliament), this does not mean that every member of the population will accept those laws – the legalisation of same sex marriages is a case in point. Indeed, even if the parliament and the president genuinely support the relevant draft law in the near future, it will not mean the degree of intolerance on this particular issue will decline in the country as a whole.

It is also important to remember the influence of factors such as stress: people living with the sound of bombs and air raid alerts are hardly going to be able to fully and rapidly recognise all the advantages of introducing 'European values' in Ukraine and their role in shaping the global future of the whole country. If for no other reason than, over the last few months, many Ukrainians have lost the ability to envision even their own short-term futures – not to mention the future of the nation.

European integration is a complex process which involves interaction between many institutions at various different levels: whether social, political or economic. It brings new opportunities, access to funding and creates new ideological standards in society. However, for all these changes to bring qualitative improvements, Ukrainian citizens must be genuinely ready for them. And this very preparation must be one of the main priorities for Ukraine on the path to that long-awaited 'European dream'.



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