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In Ukraine, activists vow to hold new government's feet to the fire

Український уряд під контролем активістів

Помаранчева революція 10 років тому багатьом здавалася досить багатообіцяючою, але не змогла викоринити системну корупцію в українському уряді. Цього разу, за словами активістів, вони обов'язково доб'ються проведення реформ.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0609/In-Ukraine-activists-vow-to-hold-new-government-s-feet-to-the-fire>

Kiev, Ukraine — Hanna Hopko buzzes in and out of her office in Kiev, flitting from meetings with experts to telephone calls with political advisers. Her phone never stops ringing. She hardly has time to respond to the hundreds of messages that she receives daily on Facebook.

Breathless, she feels that she is in a race against time to draft new laws for Ukraine's parliament. Saturday's inauguration of President Petro Poroshenko capped a tumultuous chapter in Ukraine that began with mass protests last November in Kiev's Independence Square, known as Maidan. Now another chapter is beginning. "Our window of opportunity is not so big," she says. "We have to move fast."

Ten years ago, after Ukraine's Orange Revolution, activists like Ms. Hopko would have sighed with relief: A new leader had won in a fair and free election and taken power. But today they see the victor as beside the point. In their new Ukraine, they say, it is no longer up to "one guy" to decide, but up to all of civil society to press for reforms, from public procurement to judicial, to address the endemic corruption in Ukraine that was a rallying cry in Kiev and across the country.

"We learned the lessons from the previous revolution," says Svitlana Zalishchuk, the executive director of the advocacy group Center of United Actions, which focuses on government accountability. "It is not enough to change faces, you have to change the rules."

'Reforms, reforms, reforms'

The Orange Revolution, which ten years ago swept aside a post-Soviet leadership and seemed to lay down democratic foundations, is now largely seen as a failure. Once

new leaders came into power, they quickly became part of the old corrupt system in Ukraine, which became independent in 1991.

Activists say that experience laid the groundwork for deeper and more revolutionary demands today. And when it comes to President Poroshenko, a confectionary tycoon, they have their guard up. They are pushing to make sure that he fully implements reforms; that new parliamentary elections are called; and that loans from the International Monetary Fund and Western nations are used productively.

“We made a big mistake in 2004, we were ready to accept wrong-doing from the side that won,” says Nataliya Gumenyuk, co-founder of an Internet television station. She attributes that to the legacy of a "Soviet mentality" in which "there is a big guy somewhere and he decides." Now it's no longer up to "one guy," she says.

Ten years ago, this generation of young activists were students on the sidelines. Many have studied abroad, speak perfect English, and are working closely with grant makers from the US and European Union. Today they are the strategists, says Oleh Rybachuk, a former politician and deputy minister who chairs the Center of United Actions.

He says they are part of a more worldly generation that views Europe as Ukraine's future and knows that the status quo will get Ukraine nowhere. “They say don't just give us money," he says, "[help us make] reforms, reforms, reforms.”

Holding government accountable

Hopko's colleagues say she became an activist the “day she was born.” As an 11-year-old, she'd stand up and ask the teacher why the son of the maid got a worse score on a test than the prosecutor's son, even though the former deserved better. So she naturally took her place on the Maidan in November.

When someone threaten to torch her car, she sent her 3-year-old daughter off with her mother, about a day's drive away. When her husband and mother both pleaded with her to leave the capital as well, she refused. The civil society group that she co-coordinates, Reanimation Package of Reforms, has already managed to get five laws passed since it was founded in February. They comprise about three dozen organizations and 150 individuals.

As a reporter, Ms. Gumenyuk, a petite 30-something, covered the Arab spring. When tensions began mounting at home, she joined a group of journalists to set up Hromadske, or "public," an online broadcaster that launched at the Maidan protests and has not stopped since. Its audience peaked at half a million at the height of the protests.

For her generation, even in a time of war – which many believe Ukraine could be on the brink of as pro-Russian separatists in the east challenge the state – no one and nothing is off limits. “We say we won't accept wrongdoing by anyone, even us. If the defense minister makes a mistake, we will be there.”

“The system must change from the outside,” says Ostap Yednak, a colleague of Hopko's who sold off 70 percent of his timber business in February to focus on full-time activism. Every week he leaves his wife and young son at home in Brody, a small town in western Ukraine, and takes a night train to Kiev, returning only on weekends.

He is exhausted, and his wife is worried. But he can't forget the bloody events he witnessed on the Maidan. “My wife said, ‘let someone else do it.’ But I explained to her, if I don't do it, then our son will be standing in the Maidan, like me, ten years from now.”