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Ukraine: Stronger Together

Democracy! The Podcast

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Adrienne Ross 0:06

Hi, and welcome to *Democracy! The Podcast* that shines the light on some of the darkest challenges facing the fight for democracy around the globe.

Joe Biden 0:16

Democracy will and must prevail.

Adrienne Ross 0:20

This podcast is brought to you by the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening direct from Washington DC, with support from our friends at the United States Agency for International Development through the Global Elections and Political Transitions Award. I'm your host, Adrienne Ross.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the future of Ukraine was not certain. Yet this year, despite a peace that has been plagued with chronic instability and political turbulence, Ukrainians are celebrating 30 years of hard-fought independence. Ahead, we sit down with all three of the Consortium's Country Directors to talk about how working together makes democracy stronger. And then, against the ropes. His name is Dr. Iron Fist, but today we'll call him Mr. Mayor. The Honorable Vitaly Klitschko Mayor of Kyiv is just one of the country's many popular mayors. He joins me to talk about his tremendous turn from World Title Heavyweight boxing champ to Mayor of Ukraine's largest city. First, a quick 360 degree look at Ukraine's democracy.

Amy Radlinski 1:33

As Ukraine marks 30 years of statehood this year, citizens can look back with confidence that their country has made the historic leap from its authoritarian past. While democratic elections and peaceful transfers of power are hallmarks of the modern Ukrainian democracy, this nation has not been without its challenges. In 2004, the Orange Revolution objected to massive corruption, voter intimidation and electoral fraud in the aftermath of the presidential race that year and brought great hope of progress. Then, in 2014, the Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity rejected the authoritarian direction its government was taking by suspending the signing of an association agreement with the European Union. Meanwhile, Russian military aggression was taking place in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, which remain under Russian occupation today.

Adrienne Ross 2:23

We're joined now direct from key by the Consortium's three country directors for Ukraine. These guys are among the best in the field at what they do and have been doing this work together for many years in Ukraine. The secret to their sauce, they tell me, is how well the teams work together. Michael Druckman leads the mission for the International Republican Institute. Peter Erben joins us from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. And Ian Woodward is here on behalf of the National Democratic Institute. I first asked them how the COVID situation is on the ground in Ukraine.

Michael Druckman 2:58

Unfortunately, you know, again, the disinformation around vaccines and hesitancy towards vaccines, both domestic and also international actors have played a role in this. But we're seeing again, hopefully that you know, by the time we get to spring, we're hoping that things have stabilized somewhat.

Peter Erben 3:15

We work very hard within our programs to also ensure that recipients are kept safe and activities that we are associated, maybe no more so then in the elections themselves where CEPPS has made a significant effort in ensuring that voters that will come to the ball were as protected as possible. And data shows very clearly that electoral events that we've had during COVID has not led to mass spreading event pattern because of the work conducted by the consortium and very, very well supported by USAID.

Adrienne Ross 3:51

For anyone who doesn't understand how you all partner together under the consortium, will you please explain the basic setup here.

Ian Woodward 3:58

For those real people in the world that don't live with acronyms. CEPPS is the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening. And we here in Ukraine have been working under the CEPPS umbrella for the last 20 years. We have been working together the National Democratic Institute along with International Republican Institute and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, so known as NDI, IRI and IFES. We've been working together since 2016. Through a USAID supported project called Ukraine Responsive and Accountable Politics. We work together, we work independently and together with political parties, the Ukrainian parliament, government officials, civil society organizations, the Central Election Commission, the National Agency on the

Prevention of Corruption, and the goal of that work the easiest way to understand what it is we do is that we help connect real people with the institutions that want and mean to represent them.

Adrienne Ross 5:06

Can you talk a little bit about what each partner brings to the table in Ukraine?

Peter Erben 5:09

We have very different recipients, especially when it comes to our CEPPS programming in Ukraine, there's a clear tradition, just by the recipients that we address. But also, in time, I think we develop different superpowers, things that we on our team have staff that are particularly good at. And in our case, because we deal a lot with legislation, we work a lot in Parliament with legislative strengthening, and drafting laws and working in committees and so forth with Parliament every day.

Michael Druckman 5:41

Under former President Yanukovich, when Ukraine was really in a very dark period, in terms of its democratic development, we were fortunate enough to at that time be working at the local level where really the last remaining democratic, independent democratic actors were City Mayors. And that was an area that we're very happy to be in that we were able to see some glimmers of hope in that period, up to 2014. And we have continued to work. And again, USAID, I think, has done a great job of delineating these areas of responsibility and expertise in the country. And we've continued to expand upon our work with local governments. And that data is not just useful, again, for us, our partners and local government partners and political parties, but for other USAID programs, whether they be focused on local economic development, the health sector, particularly under COVID, looking at why certain cities residents are more resistant to take a vaccine than others and to look at the local level, what are the differences in terms of how you might develop an information campaign?

Ian Woodward 6:40

The thing is, we all are focused on supporting different partners, but there are times when we need a bit of expertise from the other. And my personal favorite thing about the teamwork that we have is that we're able to call on each other whenever that's needed and contribute.

Adrienne Ross 6:57

We, outside of Ukraine, understand that the information space is sometimes compromised, and maybe severely compromised at times. But how do you walk your work through that?

Peter Erben 7:09

What do we see the consortium works this issue at all levels, is very well aware of the problems that exist, the challenges, but also that we need to find solutions. At the top level, we try everything we can to help assist our recipients in developing the best possible skills. So strategic communication, and countering disinformation and false narratives. We also believe that it's extremely important that we look at this as a generational issue in that, that over time, in order for Ukraine to strengthen as a democracy, a new generation of young generations need to be very savvy in the way that they consume information and process it. And we all have different programming that addresses that, IFES, as an example, has a countrywide syndicate education program, currently 40 leading universities all over the country.

Michael Druckman 8:09

And there's a lot of ways we can approach this and how the partners approach this. The first is, again, going back to data. You know, we have local partners that are the consumers of an end clients of our data. But we also have national government figures in ministry that can look at our data when we're testing particular disinformation narratives. Such as, before the 2020 local elections, working with USAID, and through the CEPPS consortium to monitor and 10 Ukrainian cities, what types of social media narratives we were seeing to try to tribute the sources of those disinformation narratives, which, again, is helpful for a wide range of actors and also for the Ukrainian government to look at, what are we seeing and where. And the secondary I would say is, in my personal opinions, maybe a little more impactful from our perspective, working at the local level is facilitating inter-regional exchanges in Ukraine. I think there's a perception outside of Ukraine, or has been that, you know, as a very small country comparatively to, let's say, the neighbor to the east, that everyone travels around, everyone's moving, people traveled from the east to the west. And that's not true prior to 2014. This was a city where all roads, trains and planes lead to Kyiv. That if you grew up in eastern Ukraine, you went to university there, you went to work there, you spent your summers at a cottage outside your city, and you went on vacation to Turkey or Egypt on a package tour. Similarly, in western Ukraine, you weren't traveling between these regions. And you know, having these bubbles of isolation in different pockets of the population naturally can create breeding grounds for separate narratives. And so, when we look at the disinformation issue in Ukraine, it's not necessarily East versus West or Russian speaking Ukrainian speaking. It's a matter of have people had contact know each other and other cities. So, if we can bring a city council from Eastern Ukraine, to Western in Ukraine and vice versa, and have them work on a specific issue, but also as sort of a force multiplier to establish other connections and more personal, practical, professional level that they can then take back to their communities and say, No, actually, I was there in city x or y and this is what I saw with my own eyes.

Adrienne Ross 10:17

You all are looking at the possibility of going back into lockdown, how has COVID affected this disinformation space, Ian, and you know, have you had to change your way of doing business?

Ian Woodward 10:29

One of the indirect ways to combat disinformation, obviously, is to build trust in institutions that are communicating real information, facts-based information that we need people to understand, or that the government needs people to understand and listen to. And so, working directly with our partners to help them really communicate better and cut through some of the disinformation environment is very, very important. There is a lot of disinformation in Ukraine that is both homegrown and coming from outside Ukraine about the virus about the vaccines. And as we discussed earlier in the segment, we have had rollout the vaccine go pretty good, considering we're at the early stages, but there is some hesitancy here. Has COVID changed the way we do business; it has changed almost every element of the way we do business. NDI, IRI and IFES are organizations that specialize in bringing people together. The most difficult thing to do right now is to actually bring people together, we bring people together to learn from each other, we bring people together so that they can learn together and build community because it is through the community building that you're able to do difficult things like reach political consensus, or to promote a political party. So, all of our activities have had to change as a result of this.

Adrienne Ross 12:00

It sounds to me really like Ukraine has stabilized quite significantly at this time. Is that a misconception? Michael, do you want to start us with this question?

Michael Druckman 12:12

I don't know if it's a misconception, but things can change here so rapidly. Take, for example, the election of 2019. When, you know, if you've went back even a year prior, you would not have seen the three of us at a table, talking about the electoral results we had in 2019, where we had a brand-new president, someone brand new to the political scene, really bringing in a new movement of people that not just followed an election through their phones, but then went to the ballot box. And so, seeing that change in politics was quite incredible. What we're seeing now what I would say, you know, particularly from where the CEPPS consortium was positioned, both looking at the national level, looking at the legislative agenda, the reform agenda, but also looking at what's happening at the local level. I think while we've seen great success with the decentralization reform launched by the previous government under President Poroshenko that's continued through President Zelensky's administration, we've seen the rise of incredibly popular local mayors, and not just in one region. But in Mariupol in eastern Ukraine, several in western Ukraine, where traditionally, we've seen very high levels of satisfaction, but cities in the center like Kropyvnytskyi, and Chyhyryn have also increased their ratings, and therefore increase their political influence as well. And I think we may see down the road is greater friction between the national level and the

local level, as, again, local authorities were granted so much new authority. And so, seeing how that relationship between the central authorities which are represented significantly by one political party that does not have much influence at the local level, how they interact with these other different political actors with smaller political parties, is going to be something very interesting.

Ian Woodward 13:51

If you look back to the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, you can see a demand from the Ukrainian people that has really not faltered in any way, even though the change in leadership was at the top level in 2019. And that demands that government really is responsive to the needs and opinions of citizens. That change, I think was an irreversible one back in 2014, you can see it in the data that we collect is that this demand is strong. The desire for citizen participation of all kinds is extremely strong. People really, really want to see government listening, and delivering.

Peter Erben 14:37

I think we're seeing steady improvement, and certainly seeing the fruits of our work and the work of all of our partners around Ukraine. And this does not mean that democracy is stable and strong. It is still something that needs to be nurtured very, very carefully, because I think as we move into the parliamentary elections in 23, in the presidential in 24, we might have a highly competitive environment and quite fragile a neutral situation and hence the significant need for further strengthening of all aspects of the political and electoral process.

Adrienne Ross 15:20

What role do you think the international community should play in helping Ukraine in the future?

Peter Erben 15:25

There's a very strong will in Ukraine to continue strengthening society, general democracy as we work on it. And I think that includes a very strong will to partner with the international friends of Ukraine, be they nations, be they organizations, be they individual personalities, and experts and so forth. So, it is an extremely conducive environment to working, where there is an openness and collaboration to what we all bring to the table and a true sense of partnership between Ukrainians and us. And that makes it I think an environment where the investment that we make, is really leveraged quite well.

Ian Woodward 16:11

I've been here throughout the pandemic. And one of the things that I think has hurt Ukraine in the last year and a half is the fact that we have had less interaction in Ukraine with international visitors

than we normally would, that that lack of direct person to person engagement comes at a cost. But I would think that one of the best ways the international community could help is by coming and seeing the amazing people that we see every day, and really listening to our partners, and hearing about the things they are trying to achieve the things that they are achieving, the struggles that they're having, and the help that they need to really, you know, finish the last mile on whatever it is they're working on.

Michael Druckman 16:56

I think it's also important to think of how we're seen as I think there is more recognition of how Ukraine wants to play a bigger role itself, in working with the international community and tackling some of the bigger problems. You can see that just recently in Afghanistan, where Ukraine leveraged its expertise and heavy airlift capacity to help with the evacuation, actually deploying Ukrainian special forces to facilitate that, again, not a member of NATO, not in the EU. But being right there during the pandemic, again, helping fly PPE around the world. We've seen what's happening with Eastern Ukraine and Crimea, facilitating the Crimea platform event just last month, to get to draw international attention, not asking for assistance, but to formally sort of bring together partners on an equal footing and how we tackle returning the illegally annexed territory. And I think something that international party should look at doing is how can we help Ukrainians leverage their expertise in addressing some of these issues? So when it comes to the temporarily occupied territories in Donetsk and Luhansk, how can we facilitate those Ukrainian citizens, NGOs, local officials, local businesses that are doing very well in government controlled Ukraine, to be an example for what's happening just across the line, so that when Ukrainians come out of occupied Crimea for government services in Kherson, they see the dividends of the Euromaidan Revolution, decentralization, and have something to contrast. And lastly, I would say, to help Ukraine leverage, its multilingualism and multiculturalism to be a real beacon in the former, let's say, former Soviet space, Eastern European space. For those in Belarus, those in the Russian Federation, Ukraine provides an amazing, not just an example but the complete antithesis of what those citizens see on their TV is happening, and types of opportunities that citizens can have here.

Ian Woodward 18:47

When I think about the inspiration that that I have to do, the work that we do, it really comes from our partners. And in particular, there is an energy and a desire and a drive to really change fundamentally the relationship between government and people. And that energy and desire and drive really is best personified in the in the, those two groups, really the young and the women leaders in Ukraine. And if I was, you know, if I was going to give a guest to Ukraine a tour of what we do, that's where I would start.

Adrienne Ross 19:24

Ian Woodward, Peter Erben, Michael Druckman. Thank you so much for joining us today. And thank you for showing us how much better we are when we work together.

Peter Erben 19:33

Absolutely. Thank you for the opportunity.

Adrienne Ross 19:43

As we just heard, one of Ukraine's keys to successes has been the triumph of the local mayor, and today we're joined by one of those Ukrainians. The Mayor of Kyiv, the Honorable Vitaly Klitschko is a former world heavyweight boxing champion. He held the World Boxing title from 1999 to 2000 and has defeated 15 fighters for the World Heavyweight title. Suffice to say he is a big deal in the boxing ring. He's also a big deal among Ukraine's mayors. He joins us now to talk about governance and what it's been like to lead Ukraine's largest city since 2014. Your rise to politics has been a little unique. First, can you tell us if any similarities exist between being a professional boxer and the fight for democracy?

Vitali Klitschko 20:31

To be honest, being the heavyweight champion of the world would be much easier than being the politician in Ukraine. Ukraine is a pretty young country; 30 years independence was celebrated a couple months ago. But if you compare the sport life and political life, compared to boxing, there are actually no clear rules in Ukrainian politics. I can compare Ukrainian politics more similarly not with boxing, but it is much more similar with MMA. But it's my goal to bring clear rules like in sport. If you break the rules in sport, you pay a penalty or disqualified. That's why we try to give the executives exactly the same standards in Ukrainian politics.

Adrienne Ross 21:32

Well, I laugh but we both know democracy is serious business and the United States struggles just like every other country struggles a bit with democracy. So, I certainly appreciate your response. Switching gears, a little bit to more serious topic when we talk about the war in Ukraine. Can you tell me how the war has changed or influenced your role as mayor after the Euromaidan Revolution?

Vitali Klitschko 21:56

The war change life for every Ukrainian. We Ukrainians paid for democracy in our way, European way of development of our country was a pretty big price. The price is more than 10,000 lives. And more than 30,000 citizens of our hometown went through the war. Right now, I don't need to

explain to everybody that this war in East of Ukraine with huge support of our eastern neighbor, the Russian Federation. Because everybody understands the media war and brainwashing.

Adrienne Ross 22:43

Based on what you just said, about how difficult it has been with the war, the citizens become more important than ever in this circumstance. Have you had to rethink how you talk to your constituents, the people who vote for you? Have you had to change?

Vitali Klitschko 22:59

Right now, we understand how important the great result is, a very fast result in our country, a result for which is felt by every citizen in Ukraine, and that's why I have a great answer the best answer for our friends, and also for our enemies, which is our success, our political success, our economic success, success of our country. And that's why I do, and I do my job nonstop to deliver to citizens in especially in self-government. I'm responsible for capital of Ukraine, including new infrastructure projects, new roles, new preschools, new schools, parks, bridges, and it's to show the local government works well.

Adrienne Ross 24:01

We talked a little bit about what's difficult about being Mayor. What have you enjoyed the most about being Mayor?

Vitali Klitschko 24:08

I enjoy it because I change the life every day for the people and I enjoy much more than anything if I go to the street and check the projects, check the new roads, so the people come to me and say "Mr. Mayor, thank you so much for your job. We are enjoying so much the new preschool when we were go with our children, we enjoy a new road when they drive, we see the changes in our city" and it's a much more enjoyable part of my job.

Adrienne Ross 24:44

And they're seeing results from democracy it sounds like...

Vitali Klitschko 24:47

And they see the feedback of people who enjoy and sees results, what you're doing and they are very appreciative and it's actually a big part and the biggest enjoyable part of my job. Kyiv is one

of the largest cities in East Europe. We calculate the people who live in our city with cell phones, with JSM operator. And that during the night, our hometown sleep 3.6 million people. During the day, the people come from many districts to our city, for its 1 million more. Kyiv is a very green city, one of the greenest cities in Europe. We have a lot of parks and green zones. We have a lot of islands in our central it's a very historical city, everyone who comes to our city is very surprised by how beautiful the city is. It is a European city; friendly people live here. And that's why I'm as mayor of Kyiv, use the moment and want to invite everyone welcome to Kyiv, welcome to Ukraine. I promise you receive here in Kyiv for an unforgettable a moment emotion, positive emotion about the trip. The city is really beautiful. And if you find the time, always welcome.

Adrienne Ross 26:24

Well, that is that is quite an invitation. I think many of our listeners will probably take you up on that. We do though here in the United States and particularly see a lot of different headlines from Ukraine about a real struggle for democracy. How do you think your constituents feel about democracy? And how do you think it's doing overall in your country right now?

Vitali Klitschko 26:46

It's a political fight and competition between the ideas. Yes, very good for democracy. In this point Ukraine has a huge difference from our neighbors, I mean, Villa Russia, or Russia. And after the Revolution of Dignity, we made the choice to build real democracy and European democracy which for us is a priority. I'm skeptical sometimes many countries celebrate also 30 years in dependency, for example, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, the former Soviet bloc, when Iron Curtain fell down these countries, we're at the same start position. And we see how our neighbors for example, Poland, actually do it pretty well. And development is this way, they already part of European family, the European Union and make huge progress. And we, in 30 years, declare it a lot but not implement so many ground points for development, our country for our independency for our democracy, that is why we Ukrainian continue our fight for our values, for our goal for our vision to be really democratic, European country, Ukraine. We are fighting for that. And it's not easy fight. It's a lot of challenges in this way. Because all changes starting from the heart of the country from capital from Kyiv. And that's why it's my personal responsibility to change not just the capital of Ukraine, I'm responsible also for whole country because Kyiv is an example for every city, for every village, for every Ukrainian

Adrienne Ross 29:17

Is that key? Do you think that approach that Kyiv is responsible for the country has that been key in your success?

Vitali Klitschko 29:25

The key to success is you have to do it well and gives the best everything for the band of you to be successful. Have one personality, communicate successes with 1,000s or millions of people to bring your resolve that success of the country and that why we hungry, we're hungry to be successful. And because when we continue to fight for our hometown, for our home country and the question of the time is that we want to do it fast is possible. And thank you one more time for all friends who support Ukraine, who support Kyiv, who support my home country to be a successful democratic country, to work to be in the big family of democratic countries.

Adrienne Ross 30:27

Mayor Vitaly Klitschko, thank you so much for joining us today.

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