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An Interview with Amb. Roman Popadiuk, Chair of the U.S. – Ukraine Foundation

What has surprised you the most and pleased you the most about the relationship between Ukraine and the U.S. over the 25 years since you left Kyiv?

I believe that the United States played an important role in helping to develop civic culture in Ukraine. Through a series of U.S. government and NGO programs and assistance, the Ukrainian people developed a stake in the system by participating in the overall political and civic life of the country. The shortcoming of the political process has been that the political will of the people was never translated into strong policies and effective government. While the populace has taken to the streets in peaceful protest and voiced its discontent through the ballot box, the same ruling circles seemed to circulate in the government with little attention to the desires or needs of the people, leaving successive governments mired in gridlock and ineffective against corruption. However, in the April presidential election, Volodymyr Zelensky, new to politics, received 73 percent of the popular vote on a platform of fighting corruption, pursuing reform, and ending the conflict with Russia. Zelensky has a clear mandate to tackle Ukraine's many problems. Optimism is high, and there is an expectation that Ukraine may have finally overcome the historical disconnect between the people and the government.

Is there still a danger of Ukraine following back into Moscow's orbit?

I am very optimistic about Ukraine's future. In addition to the political environment, two other developments have taken place that support Ukraine's continued movement towards the West. First, there is a whole new generation since independence that identifies with the freedom and economic progress that mark Western societies. Second, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, as seen by the takeover of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine, has spurred the Ukrainian goal of integrating with the Western world. ... [Yet] Russia has had a long historical role in Ukraine and therefore finds it difficult to accept Ukraine moving out of its orbit. In addition, Russia sees Ukraine as a buffer against the West for defense purposes as well as against the importation of Western values. Ukraine's integration with the West poses the risk to Putin that his own authoritarian structure can be challenged as the Russians see a major neighbor enjoying the fruits of a free and open society and come to demand the same for themselves. It is, therefore, difficult to foresee any changes taking place under Putin that can help resolve the conflict with Ukraine in a manner beneficial to Ukraine.

How confident are you that corruption is being dealt with?

Corruption is a major problem in Ukraine and has been so since my days as ambassador. The lack of transparency in the judicial system and corrupt judges are of particular concern. These serve to undermine the confidence of the people in the judicial system and also have a major impact on the investment environment. Foreign businesses are wary about doing business in Ukraine due to a lack of a judicial procedure that is open, fair, and consistent. Institutional building blocks have been put into place with the creation of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine and the High Anti-Corruption Court. Actual practice, however, has fallen short, particularly regarding prosecution of high-profile figures. Some concrete steps to fight corruption have been taken, such as the creation of a transparent state procurement system. In addition, some reforms have taken place in the gas sector, an important step since the energy sector has been the most prone to corruption.

In the current situation, you have been very disciplined in keeping your own counsel and not voicing strong personal views. Why?

It is unfortunate that the Foreign Service has become entangled in the current controversy about Ukraine, thereby exposing it to possible politicization by various forces and negative scrutiny. This runs the risk of undermining public support of the Foreign Service, which can impact morale, retention, and recruitment. The members of the Foreign Service are dedicated professionals whose expertise is important to the carrying out of U.S. foreign policy, and they serve each administration, irrespective of politics, in a nonpartisan and professional manner.

What do you want Americans to know about Ukraine that doesn't get enough attention?

Ukraine has become embroiled in the political controversies swirling in Washington at a time when Ukraine needs sustained support from the U.S. and Europe in its conflict with Russia. There is not a clear understanding of the long-term security interests that are at stake with having a viable and free Ukraine. A stable Ukraine will help thwart Russia's attempts at recreating its empire, provide a reliable regional partner, serve as an impetus for reform in Russia itself, and provide a lucrative and large economic market for the region and the United States. Staying firmly engaged in Ukraine also sends a strong signal to Russia that the United States and our allies will not countenance Russian expansion.