

Київ, 12 Sep 2017

Letter to The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

It would not be an exaggeration to say that after the Revolution of Dignity Ukraine's civil society and its rising influence over the process of the country's transformation have been in the spotlight of the international community. Along these lines, the recent article 'Wake-up Call for Ukraine's Civil Society' by Ms. Kateryna Smagliy, published by the Wilson Center, about the current challenges that Ukrainian third sector is facing - both from outside and from within - has gained a lot of international attention. However, while Ms. Smagliy had undoubtedly good intentions, a number of serious claims made in the article, particularly, about the Reanimation Package of Reforms, do not correspond to reality. Therefore, reason for writing this open letter to the Wilson Center - the organization that I deeply respect - is to respond to Kateryna Smagliy's assessments and judgments, which she expressed in the above-said piece and which we find misleading.

For more than three years, Ukrainian society has been experiencing a difficult period of reformation. The path turned out to be more complex than it seemed in March 2014, when the first constituent meetings of leaders of NGOs, the founders of the coalition the Reanimation Package of Reforms (hereafter - RPR), took place. The conclusion reached unanimously after the first two years of promoting reforms is that this process resembles more a marathon distance than a sprint race, which requires a precise estimation of our resources and concentration of efforts.

It is not a secret that at the time of establishment of the RPR coalition after 24 years of Ukraine's independence, there was not a single civil society platform capable of working on the common agenda and being an influential player among stakeholders for a long time. Some similar initiatives were created to solve specific problems and did not last long. It was for the first time in 2014, on Maidan, that a motivation to create a multidisciplinary group of participants with expertise and ability to work in groups for the sake of development a joint action plan emerged. Although three years have already passed since then, this determination not only has not vanished, but was even solidified.

According to sociologists, today RPR is known by 39% of citizens. Members of the Parliament often publicly refer RPR's position while discussing draft laws in the Parliament, while some ministries copy RPR along with government departments in communication of their decisions. When an attack on civil society took place through the introduction of the e-declaration for anti-corruption activists, it was the RPR that became the response centre and appealed to the President of Ukraine with the call for immediate action.

Due to the priorities focus of RPR expert groups, the coalition has been able to guarantee quality solutions elaborated in accordance with the full cycle of policy-making process. More than 110 laws in Ukraine, adopted by the Parliament over the past three years, were drafted or advocated by the Reanimation Package of Reforms experts.

Ukraine has a lot to be proud of, although we often see and hear displeased citizens in social networks and in the streets. However, if we face the facts, three years ago we did not have an independent system of high-level corruption investigation bodies (National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine, Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office), public e-procurement system Prozorro, e-declaration system of assets and property of public servants, 413 amalgamated territorial communities, open government registers of ownership, a public broadcaster, obligatory disclosure of ownership structure and ultimate beneficial owners of TV channels and radio stations, etc. All these progressive changes, without exception, were introduced with participation of organizations that are members of the RPR coalition.

At the same time, the assertion that the RPR represents the entire Ukrainian civil society is not true: 82 participating organizations make up only 0.001% of the total number of registered NGOs. Unfortunately, it is precisely from this assumption that false accusations of certain expectations and irrelevant obligations, none of which corresponds to our mission and strategy.

Another point of distortion in Ms.Smagliy's piece concerns the funding of the coalition. In contrast to the claims about 'millions of dollars' allegedly provided by international donors to RPR, the actual funds received by the coalition are far from extraordinary, given that they were allocated for the general needs of the coalition. The entire amount spent by RPR for the whole period of its existence does not exceed 0.007% of the grant money provided by the international community to Ukrainian NGOs in last two years. Since summer 2014, the total amount of RPR's expenditures on the overall needs of the coalition amounted to a little over \$ 1.6 million, received from the European Commission, USAID, SIDA and other international donors. This information is public and available from the RPR annual reports on our website.

Contrary to Ms.Smagliy claims about the RPR members enjoying the 'warm bath' effect, in reality we are facing increasing attacks on our address: RPR's team is blamed for the donor's excessive attention, spending excessive amount of funds on "non-experts", using RPR's reputation for individual purposes of its experts, such as participation in fellowships abroad or taking the personal advantage of the relationship with stakeholders and decision-makers. Needless to say that along with the general alarming trends to downplay the impact of civil society from the side of the authorities, such defamatory statements about its largest coalition play into the hands by no one else but the opponents of Ukraine's democratic transformation. Therefore, we deeply regret that Ms. Smagliy has made the same groundless accusations against RPR without providing a constructive and well-balanced assessment of our work at this stage.

In fact, the missing part of Ms.Smagliy story concerns those aspects of RPR's activity, its plans and prospects that can be highlighted. We are at the turning point of our further development, currently working on the RPR's Strategy for 2018-19 years.

The coalition, encompassing more than 300 experts at the moment, is constantly growing, gathering even more new experts who are among leaders in their areas. It is true that several

people left RPR. But in most of the cases it happened for reason other than described in the article. For example, because of the revealed plagiarism or violation of ethical standards. Only one organization in the entire RPR's history has left the coalition, since it turned out that it did not have transparent funding and promoted legislative changes that may have been ordered by local oligarchs. This case has clearly shown that RPR is not a place for political lobbyists and dependent structures.

Almost every month we accept 1-2 new members from dozens of registered candidates. The latest example is the well-known team in the education sphere Prometheus, civil project for producing and promoting MOOCs, that joined RPR in early September 2017. In the response to my question about their motives to become a member of the RPR the founder of the organization and opinion leader Ivan Prymachenko replied: "We understand that as a separate organization we can provide access to the better education to hundreds of thousands of people (now, at Prometheus, there are 400,000 registered users), but to grant access to the better education for tens of millions of Ukrainians, we have to systematically change the institutions and work on legislative level. Implementation of these systemic changes on a national scale can only be achieved by pooling the efforts of all progressive organizations and people from the educational community".

At the same time, the advocacy work, carried out by RPR in the halls of power does not guarantee the effect of the reforms that would be felt by the majority of citizens. The fault for such a expectations-reality gap is unlikely to lie 100% with us. In most situation, it is the local executive authorities, responsible for implementation of the adopted laws, that serve as a stumbling block to tangible reform results on the local level.

Keeping this in mind, we have been encountered with an important dilemma - how to work with the above-said obstacle. The first response was the new regional policy that we launched at the end of last year. New regional civil society coalitions as independent structures, formed with the help of our advice and guidance, intend to use the RPR organizational model and intensify push on the local authorities. Already 12 regional coalitions in various parts of Ukraine have been established, and the demand for such a grassroots reform advocacy is only increasing. Against this backdrop, the assertions that RPR neglects the issue of citizens engagement are either ignorant or purposefully misleading.

In November, RPR will organize the largest forum of civic organizations and activists from all over Ukraine, aiming to bring together all experts and activists who knows how to jointly set up the agenda of their cities and are willing to unite efforts in a single plan of implementation of changes. Being well aware about the decentralization process, we aspire to bridge leading NGOs in Kyiv and other key cities in order to combine their efforts for achievement of a common goal. The second response will consist in development of the updated Roadmap of Reforms in the beginning of 2018, which will take into account issues that are relevant to all regional coalitions.

In regard to our international cooperation, we will have to introduce some changes in our approaches of advocating reforms to our international partners (diplomatic corps, international organizations, foreign journalists and experts). We acknowledge and deeply appreciate their support of Ukraine's reform process, since no major progressive systemic changes at the

national level would have happened without their involvement and close monitoring of developments in Ukraine. However, at times, our fierce reviews of the inactivity of the Parliament or the President do not find support even within them, and we would not be ready to scale back our demands from the authorities. At the same time, we should remain partners who listen to each other's opinions - this is the only way to continue the work to succeed in making Ukraine a truly democratic, respectable and prosperous country.

We understand that the rush of the reforms of the post-communist country leading by the political elite, which was formed in that particular country, can not shoot forward easily. However, we are also aware that the reanimation process can not last forever. We are perhaps the most interested party of the results of social development.

Obviously, the next step will be the replacement of politicians and officials with representatives of our generation. Already in the upcoming 2019 elections, some activists may take part in political campaign, similarly to 2014, when six co-founders of the RPR became MPs and left the third sector.

This year, a new round of implementation of the public service reform is taking place. A number of experts have already either switched to government work or are seriously considering this opportunity. The inflow of these new people will fundamentally change the quality of public administration and bring the best practices of transparency and accountability, acquired during active work in the civil society sector.

The greatest achievement of RPR is a 'bug-free' system of joint decision-making and adherence to the "one voice" principle. However, the difference of organization's structures and their styles of communications (from radical, almost hostile attitude to government, to a very moderate collaboration) challenges the coordination of a large number of the most successful teams within the coalition. The new strategy should help us to more clearly formulate our positioning and communication for the next two years.

It is important that we all understand our role at this historic moment. It is great that we managed not to run away, but to get together as one during the dramatic 2014 year. However, with the experience of collaborative work, the RPR became a major school of systematic interaction between people with state-building views. All those who went through this school did not step down because of small arguments and reluctance to negotiate with their colleagues, but felt the force of unity and the synergy that ensures the result.

To conclude with, I would like to share with you some observations from my recent conversation with the donors. They have obviously read the article and were astonished by many subjective assessments and negativism, expressed in Ms. Smagliy's piece. However, the only risk that the donor community unanimously recommends us to beware - and we fully share this view - is that the RPR should not become an elite club, which closes itself on interaction with the authorities only, whose interest towards making reforms is constantly decreasing.

All of our best practices and expertise needs to be transferred to a wider range of agents of change in the country - and this is already an integral part of our vision for 2018/19 strategy.

We have become the centre of knowledge and influence - now such centres should be developed in dozens of cities with the involvement of hundreds and thousands of citizens. While I'm finishing to write this letter, members of our team are 740 km away from Kyiv discussing reforms with the Severodonetsk community, which is one of the outposts of Ukrainian statehood near the line of contact with the military formations of the Russian Federation and other team is delivering a lecture on reforms at top cultural event of the year HoholFest.

Respectfully,
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Reanimation Package of Reforms