

# **Year of Poland in Ukraine. Year of Ukraine in Poland Cooperation between Polish and Ukrainian Non-governmental Organizations**

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The Year of Poland in Ukraine began almost imperceptibly amid heated political conflicts in Ukraine and a crisis among political parties in Poland. As Andrij Pavlyshyn wrote in *Lvivska Gazeta*, “It began without fanfare, without presidential handshaking, and without visible media coverage.” This certainly does not mean that it lacked importance or meaning. International relations, traditionally the exclusive domain of the state, have now become a field of activity of non-governmental organizations. The present text attempts to look at the relations that Poles have with Ukrainians and Ukraine, not in terms of inter-governmental relations or public opinion surveys, but in terms of the point of view of average citizens and non-governmental organizations, which are active players for building civic societies in both Poland and Ukraine.

Everyone who follows the relations between Polish and Ukrainian society is aware of the huge changes that have been made in the last decade or so. The establishment of an independent Ukraine, the opening of a border closed for decades, and the liquidation of the omnipotent censorship that prohibited public dialogue between Poles and Ukrainians could easily have led to the reopening of old wounds, the awakening of nationalism, and the renewal of conflicts. Many predicted just such a scenario; for some, it was politically expedient. In spite of these fears, in spite of history, and in spite of Poland’s general trend towards political and economic engagement with the West, we have observed a substantial increase in the interest of Poles in Ukraine and Ukrainians over the last ten years. Somewhat surprisingly, this interest is not originating from the generation that remembers the old conflicts—from the retirees, veterans and former residents of L’viv, but is primarily found among young people. Let me give a few examples:

- Just after Ukraine regained independence, a sudden, four-fold increase was observed in the number of people who applied to attend Ukrainian Studies at Warsaw University. The vast majority of current students does not have Ukrainian roots (less than 5% of the students are of Ukrainian nationality). Several weeks ago, when a group of students in the US embassy was asked why they had chosen Ukrainian Studies, they replied that it was a field of study with significant opportunities.
- Increasingly more often one meets young Poles who speak perfect Ukrainian, travel around Ukraine, and create Polish-Ukrainian tourism portals on the Internet (such as the [www.suputnik.ua](http://www.suputnik.ua) portal).
- Recent surveys of the third sector in Poland showed that Polish non-governmental organizations working outside the country most frequently cooperate with partners in Ukraine. Despite the considerable government subsidies for Polish-German cooperation,

almost twice as many organizations are working with partners from Ukraine than from Germany.<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand this phenomenon, it is important to look at the history of the last dozen or so years of cooperation between non-governmental organizations from Poland and Ukraine.

At the turn of the 1980's initial contacts with partners in Ukraine were initiated by institutions that had earlier been part of the illegal democratic opposition and were operated underground or semi-openly: Polish-Czech-Slovak Solidarity, Karta, Helsinski Committee, Pomost Society, as well as by some newly-established civic organizations, such as Warsaw's Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe (now defunct), Education for Democracy Foundation, and Lublin's NN Theatre. For Poland and Polish non-governmental organizations this period was primarily a time of settling accounts with the past, a time of public debate concerning the place of national minorities in Poland and the importance of building positive relations with them as a conscious step on the road to rebuilding contacts with societies in neighbouring countries. Many of these initiatives of reconciliation with Ukrainians, Belarusians, Czechs, and Slovaks were launched at a time when "a blurry line" still existed between the opposition organizations of the 1980's and the emerging third sector, which was just beginning to crystallize.

In the mid-1990's, conducted programs no longer had the character of touch-and-go meetings, but involved long-term efforts towards solving specific problems. A group of organizations that consciously undertook efforts to work outside the country began to form. Among these organizations were the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, the earlier mentioned IDEE Foundation, Education for Democracy Foundation, Polish-Czech-Slovak Solidarity Foundation, the Forum of Central and Eastern Europe (operating within the framework of the Stefan Batory Foundation), the Institute of Eastern Studies Foundation, and the Center for Social and Economic Research (CASE).

Taking advantage of the trails blazed and contacts established by the pioneering NGOs in 1996-1998, several dozens of leading Polish non-governmental organizations working mainly in Poland included participants from Ukraine in their programs or created programs addressed specifically to Ukrainian participants. Such was the case with the Foundation for Rural Development, the School for Leaders Association, and the Homes for Reconciliation and Meetings, which were established in order to conduct activities aimed at German-Polish understanding but were then broadened to include participants from the East, primarily from Ukraine. The considerable participation of Ukrainian NGO representatives in the Forums of Non-governmental Initiatives, organized in Poland, was perhaps the crowning achievement of cooperation, which expanded during this period.

The subsequent stage of cooperation began in 1999. The roads to Ukraine, blazed by the pioneering organizations of the 1990's, became accessible to a significant number of Polish NGOs. The number of organizations cooperating with Ukrainian partners increased to more than 100. Almost all of the leading Polish non-governmental organizations are now engaged in

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<sup>1</sup> Justyna Dłubrowska, Marta Gumkowska, Jakub Wygnański, *Podstawowe fakty o organizacjach pozarządowych – raport z badania 2002 (Basic Facts about Non-governmental Organizations – Report from Surveys taken in 2002)*.

various forms of cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Representatives of Ukrainian organizations have become a part of everyday life for the third sector in Poland. Increasingly more local organizations operating on the level of a single city or region are also finding partners (such as Youth Parliament in Przemyśl, and Lublin's "Happy Childhood").

The significant interest that Polish organizations have in international activity places new challenges before the sector. In order to cope with these challenges, the "Zagranica" (Abroad) Working Group, a platform of Polish organizations working outside the country, was established. The first joint activity consisted of an effort to formulate ethical principles. These principles were in fact an attempt to chronicle the positive experiences of cooperation with partners from Ukraine. The *Guiding Principles of Polish Non-governmental Organizations working Abroad* contains, among others, the following points:

1. The people, organizations and local communities with which we cooperate in the East are our partners. As partners, they have the right to know and understand the essence of a joint project.
7. We make every effort that our programs are conducted in the language of the participant. We limit the use of international languages to a minimum.
9. We build understandings across borders. For us, the citizens of Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine are the hosts in their countries. We want to support them in activities to establish democracy, independence and a strong economy in their countries.

Support from the Polish and Ukrainian governments for these activities has been limited at best. Partners and sponsors from the European Union have taken a totally passive position. Projects have primarily been realized due to the determination of the Polish and Ukrainian partners as well as the group of US sponsors that consistently support cross-border programs in Eastern Europe. The National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Institute support East-East programs. The Stefan Batory Foundation and the Renaissance Foundation are conducting a joint program of youth cooperation. The Polish-American Freedom Foundation founded the Land Kirkland scholarship program as well as a program of regional cooperation, RITA (Region in Transition), while PAUCI (the Poland-America-Ukraine Cooperation Initiative) was established as a result of mutual cooperation between the US, Polish and Ukrainian governments.

### **Geography, exemplary areas of cooperation**

It is logical to conclude that building ties of cooperation would be the most difficult in the areas of Galicia and Przemyśl, where the memory of the painful past is most vivid. It can now be said, however, that the determination to cooperate proved to be greater than historical animosity. Successive crises in official relations connected with the anniversaries of the Vistula Campaign and the Volhynia tragedy, as well as disputes over monuments and cemeteries were ignored rather than used as pretexts for breaking off relations. As a result, Polish organizations maintain the greatest number of contacts with partners in L'viv, Ivano-Frankovsk, Lutsk,

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<sup>2</sup> The most comprehensive list of Polish non-governmental organizations working in Ukraine as well as other countries of Eastern and Southern Europe is available at the [www.ngo.pl](http://www.ngo.pl) portal.

Ternopil, Chernivtsi and Rivne. Interestingly, due to a determined attitude, smaller cities such as Nadvirna have also found a relatively large number of partners in Poland. The Lion Society—one of the oldest non-governmental organizations in Ukraine, which assisted in establishing more than one dozen organizations and civic initiatives, played the leading role in Western Ukraine in building contacts with Poland. The Lion Society not only cooperates with many Polish organizations, but has also cleared the way for many other Ukrainian organizations to find partners in Poland.

Another area where numerous ties of cooperation have been established with Poland is Crimea. Following a half-century of exile in Central Asia the Crimean Tatars have returned to their homeland, Crimea, in independent Ukraine. The “Welcome to Europe” program, initiated by the IDEE Foundation, has engaged more than one dozen non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, and hundreds of people of good will from Ukraine and Poland in order to establish the basis for a civic society among the Crimean Tatars. Through educational programs, Polish partners have supported the development of non-governmental organizations, modern schools and the local press. Within the framework of programs involving internships and workshops, they have shared experiences ranging from a campaign of civil disobedience to taking responsibility for the local community with the local leaders of the Medzlis (the executive arm of the Tatar community’s parliament), non-governmental organizations, teachers, farmers, and finally activists of regional self-government. They have also played an important role in building ties between newly established Tatar organizations and partners from western Ukraine.

Until the new millennium, contacts with eastern Ukraine were sporadic at best. Despite the desire to cooperate shown by the increasingly large number of non-governmental organizations being established in areas like Lugansk, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Poltava, there were no examples of long-term effective cooperation. The city of Berdyansk was an important breakthrough. Due to the commitment of scholars from the Lane Kirkland program, local authorities and activists from local non-governmental organizations, several Polish non-governmental organizations from the Lublin area took an interest in this city, opening areas of activity for subsequent partners.

When one looks at areas in which Polish and Ukrainian non-governmental organizations cooperate, it is easy to see that they concentrate on social and systemic transformations (such as macroeconomic reforms, local democracy, regional government, independent media, human rights), as well as on education, science, culture, and the consequences of Poland’s integration into the European Union. In an article published in conjunction with the XIII Economic Forum in Krynica, Poland, entitled “Poland-Ukraine: Cooperation between Non-governmental Organizations,” Anna Wróbel presented the most important areas of cooperation and the most interesting projects conducted in recent years.<sup>3</sup> I would like to stop here for a moment and consider three aspects of this cooperation: support for local civic initiatives, education, and the influence of Polish-Ukrainian relations on the future, following Poland’s entry into the European Union.

Poland’s experience in recent decades, and in particular the experience of approximately forty thousand Polish non-governmental organizations, has led to a deep conviction that both the

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Wróbel, *Wspólne problemy, wspólne działania Polska-Ukraina. Współpraca organizacji pozarządowych.* (Common Problems, Joint Polish-Ukrainian Activities. Cooperation between Non-governmental Organizations) Warsaw 2003

local community and the nation as a whole, if jointly committed to solving existing problems, can have an important influence on their own fate and—with some luck—on the course of history. Such a goal is worth trying for in order to improve the quality of education in local schools, to build a hay-fueled power plant and to show that it is possible to establish a local social fund in a city where unemployment is more than 30%. A common feature of a large number of programs in Ukraine in which Polish NGO's were involved had to do with building mechanisms that engaged local communities in finding effective solutions to their most urgent problems. Good examples include the already-mentioned projects in Crimea, training programs of individual centers of the Foundation for the Development of Local Democracy, the ISO certificate awarded to the city government of Berdyansk, and the "Clean Ukraine – Clean Earth" campaign initiated in 2001 by the Our Earth Foundation in cooperation with the Association of Ukrainian Cities. The second "Clean Ukraine – Clean Earth" campaign mobilized 320,000 volunteers, a marked increase from the previous year's 75,000. During the campaign people cleaned up parks, forests, and other public areas as well as participated in educational events. Communities, government authorities, businesses, schools, and voluntary organizations all worked together for the common good. Participants learned how to cooperate and take responsibility for the place in which they live and work.

A condition for the sustainability of democracy involves citizens who possess critical thinking skills, who make rational choices, understand and respect the law, are tolerant of political opponents, and actively participate in the social, political and economic life of the community. In communist countries the school, totally subordinated to the state and the ruling ideology, was the last place prepared to teach civics. It is difficult for teachers and school principals who were educated in a totalitarian system and for decades participated in the political indoctrination of youth to teach young people about democracy, a concept they do not know, do not understand, and frequently do not even believe in.

Since the mid-1990's, educational reform—particularly increasing the public's participation in it—has become one of the most important areas of cooperation between Polish and Ukrainian non-governmental organizations. More than one dozen organizations, which several years earlier changed the face of Polish education, are actively committed to projects conducted in Ukraine. Several thousand teachers and school principals have participated in workshops, internships, and seminars conducted by, among others, the Education for Democracy Foundation, IDEE Foundation, the Eastern European Democratic Center, and the Center for Civic Education. In L'viv cooperation with city educational authorities led to the establishment of an alternative center for advanced vocational teacher training. The Center for Educational Initiatives introduced Ukraine to the "Small School" program, which supports small rural schools. Warsaw's Association of Educators shared the experience of introducing modern methods of measuring the quality of student performance to the Ukrainian educational system. The Catholic Center for Youth Education (KANA) and the Foundation for Economic Education organize courses that instruct participants how to take advantage of information technology. Increasingly more often, contacts initiated by non-governmental organizations are continued by schools and methodological centers without the direct participation of the NGOs.

Since 2002 the issue of the future Polish-Ukrainian border as the Shengen border and the issue of the European choice for Ukraine have become increasingly more important topics in Polish-Ukrainian relations. The prospect of introducing visas has made Polish and Ukrainian partners aware of the danger that communities accustomed to unrestricted movement across the

border might become isolated. The initial reaction of the Polish NGO community was to begin systematically to monitor the situation at border crossings, and then monitor procedures for issuing visas by Polish consular facilities.<sup>4</sup>

Aware that the issue of Ukraine's membership in the European Union is uncertain and not of immediate concern, Polish non-governmental organizations began cooperation with Ukrainian NGOs in 2003 in an effort to promote the European choice for Ukraine. Due to the support of such organizations as the Polish Robert Schumann Foundation and the Youth Parliament in Przemyśl, a network of pro-European student clubs and organizations, such as the European Way Association in Berdyansk, is being developed. The "European Route through Poland" project, conducted by the Education for Democracy Foundation and the Center for Political Forecasting of the L'viv newspaper *Wysokij Zamok*, was an effort to transfer to Ukraine the experiences gained during the pre-referendum campaign entitled "Poland's Membership in the European Union."

A strength, but also a weakness, of cooperation conducted to date between Polish non-governmental organizations and their Ukrainian partners lies in its dispersed character and lack of coordination. This is a strength because this cooperation is not the result of hasty decisions made by politicians and sponsors, or of short-term enthusiasm; it is the result of the determined will of many people on both sides of the border. It is a weakness, however, because many important activities are conducted on the local level, in the community that is directly affected. The general public and the state administration in Poland and Ukraine still know little about the joint initiatives undertaken by non-governmental organizations.

In Poland the Zagranica Working Group is trying to change this by promoting cooperation between Polish and Ukrainian partners and, through the Partnership for Foreign Policy initiative, to exert an influence on the formulation and execution of Polish foreign policy toward countries in the region, as well as on Poland's policy of granting developmental aid. As a result of its cooperation with the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a historic meeting was held in 2000 between Prime Minister Jushchenko and representatives of non-governmental organizations working in Ukraine. Representatives of Ukrainian non-governmental organizations have also participated for several years in the Economic Forum held in Krynica, Poland (the host of the Forum is the Warsaw-based Institute for Eastern Studies Foundation). In autumn 2003 a conference was held in Kiev on the initiative of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs entitled "Cooperation between Polish and Ukrainian Non-governmental Organizations following EU Expansion" and approximately 200 Ukrainians and Poles participated. These people are very well aware that Ivan Rudnytsky was right when he wrote that "The ineptitude of Poles and Ukrainians has twice led to the destruction of Ukraine and Poland." But they also believe that there is no reason history will be repeated.

The title of an anthology of 19th and 20th century Polish political thought concerning Ukrainians and Ukraine could provide the motto for the Polish participants of this conference. The book was published several years ago by Wrocław's College of Eastern Europe Foundation under the characteristic title, "We are not Ukrainophiles." After all, those Poles who are seeking

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<sup>4</sup> The *Monitoring the Openness of Poland's Eastern Borders* project was initiated by the Stefan Batory Foundation and the Helsinki Human Rights Foundation. The results of questionnaires received from thousands of respondents provided the basis for describing relations between the Polish Border Service and travelers from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia as well as for issuing recommendations for the Polish government.

permanent partnership are not Ukrainophiles and those Ukrainian patriots seeking a road to Europe along the Polish route are, after all, not Polonophiles.

## Selected Polish NGOs working in Ukraine

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