

Enabling the Ukrainian Electorate to make Informed Choices

by Tony Berezowecki

Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF) is a Kyiv-based public opinion polling and research organization, established in 1992 as an NGO. One of the five Ukrainian partners in the Partners in Civil Society program, DIF is linked with the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queen's University, Kingston. Working with a small and dedicated full-time staff, with senior faculty from the Institute of Sociology as part-time analysts, DIF specializes in public opinion polling, analysis of social and political trends, seminars and training for journalists and politicians and international exchange programs and surveys. Freedom House, the New York-based civil rights and international political organization, has stated that:

"Through their hard work and research [DIF] have carved out an impressive niche in the Ukrainian political and research firmament. We are familiar with their high level of professionalism and intellectual competence... [DIF] can be highly influential in rapidly and efficiently providing information for the ongoing debate on the future of Ukraine."

Post-communist states need an informed political process, a free press and an empirical political science, all of which cannot exist without professional public opinion polling. The skill of polling and analysis is a necessary democratic practice as it builds the professionalism and independence of political leaders, journalists and political scientists.

Partners in Civil Society is working to strengthen DIF's internal management capacity, extend its network of analysts and journalists in Ukraine, and improve the professional competence of journalists and analysts in the use of public opinion research throughout Ukraine. DIF's Executive Director, Ilko Kucheriv, a biologist by training, was recently in Canada on a two-month program carried out by the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queen's University.

Kucheriv's role as a political activist and reformer during the period of "perestroika" paved the way for his current position. As an organizer for Rukh, he even spent 16 days in jail for his part in organizing a political demonstration during a visit to Kyiv by Mikhail Gorbachev. By 1992, he had acquired political experience the hard

way and came to the conclusion that a research-oriented think tank was necessary in Ukraine. The result was the Democratic Initiatives Centre, established as a foundation in 1996.

DIF originally provided public opinion data to politicians. But by 1993, the organization concluded that working with the media was more likely to have an impact on reform in Ukraine. As a result, DIF now focuses on working with the media, and has conducted and published local and nationwide polls of Ukrainians on many subjects. One of its periodic publications, *A Political Portrait of Ukraine*, has appeared both in Ukrainian (18 issues to-date) and English (eight).

In June, 1997, Kucheriv was in Ottawa to participate in a Results-Based Management workshop, which was also attended by Canadian NGO staff and managers of other projects in Ukraine. "Because results-based management is a universal method of planning, analysis and evaluation of activities and work, it can be applied in many areas in Ukraine," said Kucheriv. The workshop's participatory format also impressed him, and he will share these concepts and practices with colleagues and other professionals through workshops in Ukraine.

Kucheriv has said he considers *Partners in Civil Society* one of the best projects in which DIF has participated. Rather than receiving cash, as with other projects, *Partners in Civil Society* concentrates on the development of professional-

ism of their staff and associates, with an enhanced perspective on management.

Kucheriv is convinced his program in Canada will help him work more effectively in Ukraine. He said the international community has inadequate information and understanding of transitional economies such as Ukraine. Part of his work is to explain to as many Canadians as possible what is happening in Ukraine, especially given his background in polling data and analysis.

As part of his program, Kucheriv is studying the qualitative methods of political analysis which are well developed in North America. Because his trip to Canada coincided with the recent national elections, he was able to observe the campaign and watch Canadian polling professionals at work. He saw first-hand how polling data was presented to the media, and how consultants used this data to organize campaigns and change strategy. He was surprised at the amount of attention paid to polling data by pollster and the public alike, at the large number of polls conducted, and the ability to compare the results of one poll with others. This is very different from the situation in Ukraine, where the importance of public opinion analysis is not understood or appreciated.

Kucheriv expects to develop contacts with Environics, one of Canada's largest and most respected polling organizations. He is developing his English skills, which he believes will be essential in developing international contacts and an international perspective for DIF. This is also an excellent opportunity to gather information for his Ph.D. dissertation, which focuses on the attitudes of Ukrainians to issues such as privatization, market economy, reforms and private business.

Kucheriv is the third person from DIF to study in Canada through *Partners in Civil Society*. The first were political analysts and sociologists Dr. Irina Bekeshkina and Dr. Sergij Makeyev, who spent three months at the Centre for Democracy in early 1997. They audited advanced courses in politics, elections, public opinion and political communication, covering topics such as socialization, civil society citizenship, and political attitudes in post-Communist societies.

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Democratic Initiatives Director Ilko Kucheriv (2nd left) and volunteer Natalie Michajlyszyn (2nd right) meet with *Partners in Civil Society* sector specialist Olena Horyeva (l) and program manager Tony Berezowecki (r) in planning session at the Canada-Ukraine Partners Office in Kyiv.