

Supporting Ukraine's Decentralisation Process through DESPRO: Focus on Communications



This webinar was held on the 23rd of June 2021 as part of [SDC's Governance network](#) webinar series, in partnership with the Embassy of Switzerland in Ukraine and [DESPRO](#).

The reform of local self-government in Ukraine received the support of the SDC-funded DESPRO project from 2007 onwards; after the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014, a revived political will fast-tracked the implementation of the reform with impressive results. Broad communication support to the reform, supported by DESPRO, was instrumental in opening up public dialogue about decentralisation, and adopting a new administrative-territorial system in the country.

The objective of this webinar was to give an overview of the experience of Ukraine with a focus on communications and donor coordination, and the lessons learnt for other decentralisation support programmes.

Key takeaways:

- As decentralization is a political reform, for it to be successful it needs the right timing to be conceived, right mind-set and political will in the society to exist and be nurtured, and a right champion with a credible team to launch and push the reform.
- A structured government-donors coordination, cooperation and continued support to the reform was vital for the success of the decentralization reform. In particular, a clear vision for

decentralization from the government, reflected in a Common Results Framework is essential for effective coordination between donors and government.

- A large-scale communication campaign was crucial in Ukraine as lack of communication efforts and poor understanding of the reform's principles led to poor support of the decentralization and local self-government (LSG) reform by the Ukrainians in its initial stage.

First speaker: Ilona Postemska, Embassy of Switzerland in Ukraine

[Link to presentation](#)

For those who are not familiar with the Ukrainian context, Euromaidan (the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014) was an epic event in the history of Ukraine, which brought about many changes. Since then, many other dramatic events happened (e.g. the illegal annexation of Crimea, the military conflict in the east of the country) which have triggered a very ambitious reform process.

One of the key reforms, which attracted a lot of attention both domestically and internationally, was the **decentralisation reform**. It was one of the key demands of the Revolution of Dignity, which derived from the trends witnessed during the previous government (brutal centralization by the national government, persecution of independent mayors not abiding by the ruling party's rules of the game).

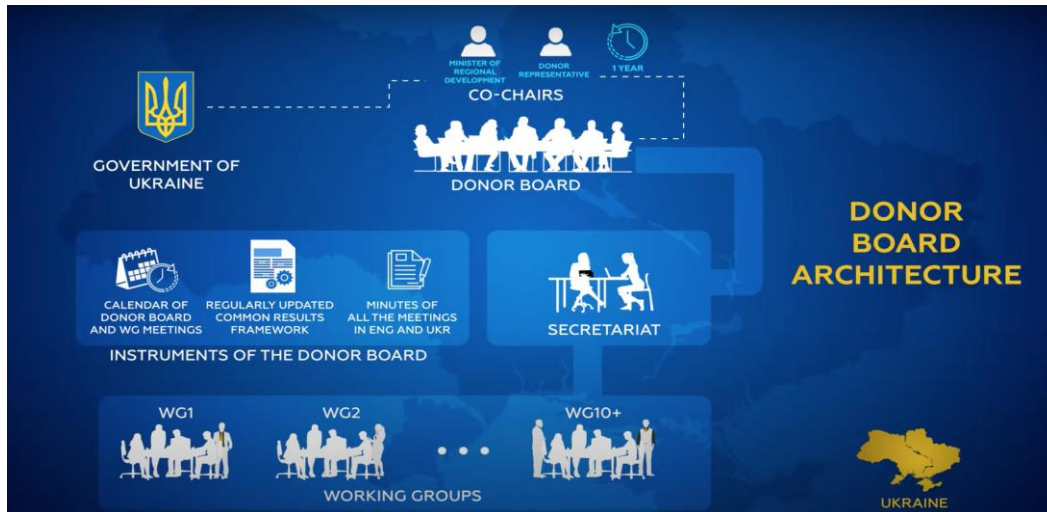
The reform had been conceptualized during earlier efforts, also supported by DESPRO: in 2009, a package of draft legislation had been prepared. So in April 2014, the reform was officially launched, there was a powerful pool of experts supporting the government, with a clear vision on how to move the agenda forward under strong political leadership. In 2015, the reform also became, so to say, "a hostage" of the [Minsk Peace Process](#) and thereby attracted even more attention of the international community. As a result, numerous development partners became interested in supporting the decentralisation reform: the number of projects supporting the reform increased from four to over twenty between 2014 and 2016.

This increase in attention required a better coordination of the efforts to support the decentralization reform, and a transition from donors-only coordination to government-donors coordination. Switzerland was the first co-chair of the then-called "Thematic Working Group of Donor Coordination on Decentralization", which then transitioned into the [Donor Board on the Implementation of Decentralization Reform in Ukraine](#). The establishment of the board was a joint initiative of the Government of Ukraine, European Union (EU) and Switzerland. DESPRO as a flagship project in the governance domain of the Swiss Cooperation provided technical support to design the Board and maintain its work through a Secretariat.

One of the key milestones of the government-donor coordination was the development of the [Common Results Framework \(CRF\)](#), which outlines all governmental priorities for the implementation of the reform and contributions by donor-funded projects. On the basis of the CRF, a two-level coordination mechanism was defined:

- At a strategic level it is the donor board co-chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister-Minister for Regional Development and a lead development partner (on a rotational basis), with representatives of key development partners, donor agencies and international organisations;
- At the operational level, these are the Working Groups under the auspices of the Donor Board, bringing together projects representatives, LSG associations, national and international experts,

civil society representatives, and middle-level management of the Ministry of Regional Development and other line ministries.



The Donor Board meets quarterly to discuss questions of strategic importance and inputs from the Working Groups, brought up thanks to the organizational facilitation by the Donor Board Secretariat supported through the DESPRO project.

The approach of the Donor Board is grounded on the following key principles:

- Development partners are not only observers but real partners; co-responsibility is anchored in the co-chairing of the Donor Board, both at strategic and working group levels;
- Everything should be accessible in 2 languages (Ukrainian and English);
- The Donor Board is inclusive and includes not only representatives of the international community and government, but also others stakeholders, including representatives of line ministries, Civil Society Organisations, associations of Local Self-Government...
- Full transparency: minutes of all meetings, decisions, and working documents are published on the [Donor Board website](#).

As a result of this coordination, the Government improved its capacity to drive the reform and steer international technical assistance more effectively. Furthermore, the working groups served as an impartial, neutral, safe and pragmatic platform for inter-ministerial coordination in relation to the reform. At some moments, the Donor Board even became a “protector” of the reform in challenging political situations – the international community issued joint statements in favor of specific reform developments. Since March 2020, the model of the Donor Board has been scaled up to the level of the Government of Ukraine and there is now a [three-tier system for coordination of international technical assistance](#).

Lessons learnt:

- It’s essential to have a clear vision for the reform, reflected in the Common Results Framework.
- A coordination mechanism structure should be lean, but still reflect the complexity of the reform;

- The CRF helps speak one language, however the transformation of this framework into a full-fledged monitoring tool requires a binding legal basis (which was not the case for the Donor Board, but will be taken into account for the new three-tier system at the national level);
- The support of the Secretariat is often taken for granted, but is essential for a smooth coordination process;
- Transparency (through the web portal) is key;
- Coordination is not a one-time effort, but is constant work and relationship-building. It is also essential to take into account regular rotations of international partners and frequent changes in government;
- A structured coordination mechanism allows for real policy influencing.

For more information, see the [DESPRO Brief on Donor coordination for decentralisation reform](#) and the [video on the Donor Board](#).

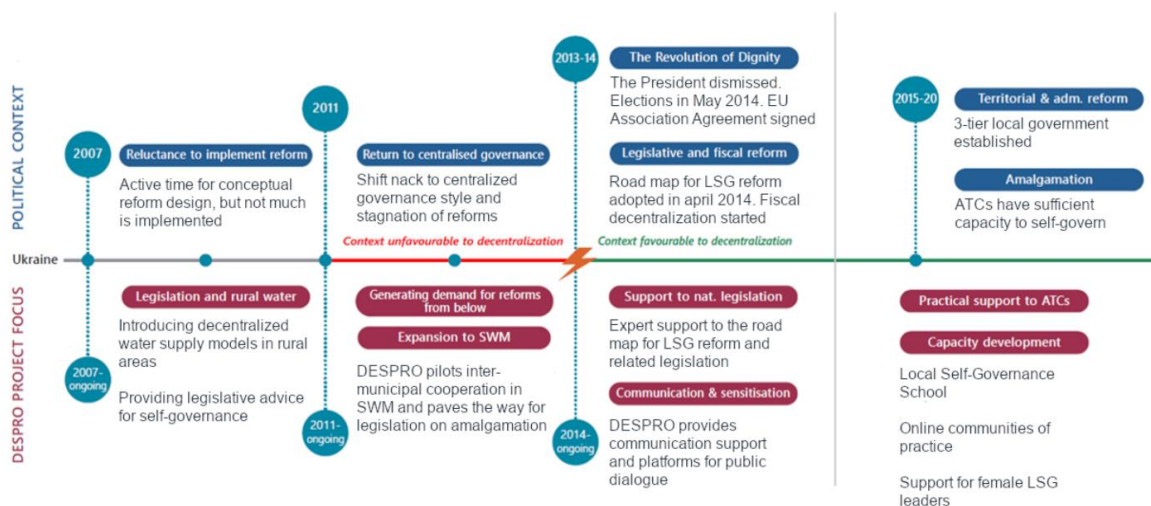
Second speaker: Oksana Garnets, DESPRO Senior Coordinator

[Link to presentation](#)

The presentation started with an overview of the timeline of the implementation of the DESPRO project (see figure below). While the conceptual design of the decentralization was developed by 2010, the next four years led to a stagnation and a shift back to centralization due to a change in political context. After the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, and the EU Agreement signed, the concept of the decentralization was accepted by the government, which kick-started the reform. Fiscal decentralization started at the same time, as an incentive for communities to merge.

Afterwards, there was a long period of active reform implementation which is still ongoing. In 2020, the new Territorial and Administrative Set-up was adopted. Ukraine went from having 11,000 local communities to 1460 amalgamated communities (now called territorial communities).

DESPRO'S SUPPORT TO UKRAINE'S DECENTRALIZATION. TIMELINE (2007-21)



Since 2014, DESPRO has been doing research on the attitude of people towards decentralization. At the beginning, the main question in focus group discussions was “What is the decentralization reform about?”. It then became about how the decentralization reform would be implemented (in 2015), why local communities needed decentralization (in 2016), and how decentralization would change citizens’ lives and how they could contribute to the reform (in 2018).

This research was the basis for the communication strategy on decentralization reform. The main steps taken were to:

- Bring together a broad coalition of stakeholders (regional, national, international, civil society...) and create a positive environment for decentralization reform;
- Establish the Communication Task Force, which then evolved into the Donor Board Working Group on Communications. This allowed to develop and implement the Communication strategy and Action Plan on decentralization reform;
- Form a pool of spokespeople who could explain Local Self-Government reform to the media.

Building trust in decentralization was key to the first steps of the communication strategy on decentralization reform, in order to communicate the reform’s key messages in a timely manner and advance the inter-governmental dialogue. This was done by producing key messages showing the reform’s advantages, highlighting that fact that communities that had not yet amalgamated were losing out financially; and disseminating guidance on opportunities and development for the communities that had already amalgamated. This was done through the webportal <https://decentralization.gov.ua/>, which has become the primary official source on decentralization in Ukraine, integrating the Donor Board, success stories, description of amalgamated communities...

The Communication team of the Central Office of Reforms (supported by DESPRO) used many different channels to advance decentralization reform: national radio and TV programmes, videos, publications, interviews, public events, Decentralization Forums... it was a huge amount of work done over the past 6 years. All these activities aimed not only at the general public, but also put pressure on politician to influence policy-making.

Lessons learnt:

- Communication support to a complex reform is required at each stage: preparation, implementation, anchoring and disseminating its successes.
- Effective communication depends on co-participation and cooperation of all stakeholders, both national and international. In particular, donor coordination helps achieve communication targets, unattainable otherwise.
- Different goals and target groups require diverse communication channels, both traditional and non-traditional (blogs, social media...).
- There is still need for coordinating local events from Kyiv. Thus, developing capacities of local communications specialists and local media is crucial – and not only for this reform.
- Permanent monitoring and analysis of the public sphere creates opportunities for timely reaction to factors preventing the reform.
- The dissemination of positive decentralization experience enables other communities to use it in their practice. This should be done in all ways possible, e.g. exposure visits, etc.

- For effective communication between the Central Office of Reforms and every local community, the reform relied on newly independent media and new information channels.

Reflections from first discussant: Tamar Tsivtsivadze, Swiss Cooperation Office for the South Caucasus

My personal reflections from the peer review of DESPRO's impact assessment are hinged upon four pillars. These are the pillars where I can easily draw parallels with my home-country of Georgia:

1. As decentralization is a political reform, for it to be successful it needs the **right timing to be conceived, right mind-set and political will** in the society to exist and be nurtured, and a right champion with a credible team to launch and push the reform. Throughout the years, such champions, mind-set and teams have fortunately existed in Ukraine, despite the government reshuffles and various external factors affecting the pace and consistency of the reform. Here I can bring Georgia's example too. Despite earlier efforts and elaboration of the Local Self-Government Code in 2014, it was only in 2019 when the government was ready to approve the Decentralization Strategy and its Action Plan.
2. **Role and value of the communication support of the reform:** A large-scale communication campaign was crucial in Ukraine as lack of communication efforts and poor understanding of the reform's principles led to poor support of the decentralization and LSG reform by the Ukrainians at the beginning. Decentralization portal, Communication Task Force, LSG Reform Communication Strategy and multiple communication tools and modes helped raise the country's awareness on different stages of the decentralization reform and built the confidence in the good of the reform. For a much smaller Georgia, communication strategy and various awareness-raising efforts have also been critical for the country's decentralization efforts. With more or less similar communication tools being used in Georgia as in Ukraine, Georgia's communication campaign is mostly funded by the donors. It lacks a country-wide outreach and comprehensiveness. Georgia can learn from Ukraine's experience in communication.
3. **Importance of donor coordination,** cooperation and continuity of the reform is undoubtedly vital for any reform, especially for highly politically sensitive reforms like decentralization and LSG reform. With so many achievements already made in Ukraine and with the decentralization reform still underway, it is instrumental to see the DESPRO continue its work in new partnerships and with new funding. In Georgia, the reform implementation is at its onset with different donors supporting it. With the SDC embarking on a modified and somewhat narrower approach towards supporting the reform as of mid-2022, we see the need for better coordination and cooperation at large. Here, Georgia could also learn from Ukraine's donor coordination board.
4. **Congruence, harmonization and coordination of the decentralization reform with other key reforms,** such as the Public Administration Reform, Civil Service Reform, different sectoral reforms. While SDC will no longer be supporting the decentralization reform in Ukraine, it will support sectoral reforms as reformation and decentralization of different thematic competences is key to arrive at decentralization at large. In Georgia, the same big donors are supporting various reforms, which provides certain continuity and sustainability of the results. However, more coordination and harmonization is certainly needed.

As to what I learnt from the Impact Assessment, it is very much the same that I already listed:

- Importance of the right timing, right mind-set and a right team to push the reform.
- Importance of the dedicated partners and stakeholders to ensure coordination, cooperation and continuity of the reform against the wavering support by some.
- Value of a comprehensive and wide-reaching communication support as skilful communication can increase the various stakeholders' support for governance reform objectives, thus influencing opinions & attitudes, and bringing so much needed behaviour change. Good communication tools can also enhance and mobilize citizen engagement in political processes and in decision-making, which is incredibly important to build the national consensus and dialogue.

These are my take-aways where Georgia can indeed learn from Ukraine's experience. Overall, I think one of my biggest take-aways is the knowledge- and experience-sharing from DESPRO's Impact Assessment per se, which I found so instrumental in development work, especially when the countries' backgrounds and contexts are similar. We can all indeed learn from each other and thus enrich our knowledge for the benefit of our work and of the countries we are working in.

Reflections from second discussant: Valbona Karakaci, Helvetas Eastern Europe

Albania has a similar context as Ukraine: we have also gone through a territorial and administrative reform, and fiscal decentralisation reform.

As far as communications are concerned, Albania has lacked the success of the Ukrainian communication campaign: while we had good "internal" communications (vertically and horizontally within government), we did not have such good "external" communications - to educate and inform the population, to bring alternative voices to the debate and maintain the reform in the political agenda. As a result, the territorial and administrative reform was contested by the opposition in the constitutional court. This was overcome eventually, but in the long-term, it has also resulted in a gap in knowledge between government and citizens on what decentralization is.

We observed that in Ukraine, people could describe what decentralization is in our focus groups, but we are still trying to fill this knowledge gap in Albania. It should also be done for decentralised services and not just for the decentralization reform. In Albania, we also have a knowledge management portal on Decentralization, which is as effectively used as in Ukraine. It helps keep track of the discourse between experts, practitioners, civil society, the general public...

On donor coordination, the experience of Albania is quite similar to Ukraine's. We also have a decentralization donor group co-chaired by SDC and the EU. SDC in Ukraine put itself at the service of the reform, even when no one else was there and was consistent in its support of the reform; while in Albania, donor coordination worked well when there was political will for the reform, but became more of a challenge when the reform had wavering support.

Discussion with participants

Q: How much of the public spending in Ukraine is currently under the control of Local Authorities? How much has it increased since the start of the decentralization reform?

Fiscal decentralization was one of the first steps taken in the reform, and became one of the key incentives for the amalgamating of communities. Local self-governments received fiscal incentives to merge. Amalgamated communities get to keep 60% of the personal income tax, local taxes (land, property tax) were transferred to the local level, and local communities received subsidies for infrastructure (from a special fund for amalgamated communities). The share of local budgets spending in the structure of the consolidated national spending in the first quarter of 2020 was 33,2% (<https://decentralization.gov.ua/news/12481>); slide 15 of [this report](#) illustrates the growth in local budget increase between 2014 and 2019.

The share of local budgets in the consolidated national budget of Ukraine was around 50% (<https://decentralization.gov.ua/en/news/9722?page=16>); by comparison, in Albania, the share of public spending is 15% - and only 11.6% in 2020 (including subsidies from the State budget).

In Ukraine, the generation of the evidence and the analysis of the benefits of decentralization were well organized. This was key to advocacy and to convincing municipalities to amalgamate, which was a voluntary process at the beginning. By comparison, the effects of fiscal decentralization were not immediately visible. Support of the decentralization with proper monitoring of the benefits to inform further decentralization decision-making is important to manage the decentralization reform and to communicate on the reform.

Local Self-Governments feel that they are owners of their communities and development, which is really a striking difference compared to 10-15 years ago.

Q: While I can see how communication and awareness campaign can be effective towards the general population and the political elite, I am interested to know more about how you changed the mindset of the "civil service elite" who have a lot of power and resources to lose in decentralization reforms. How did you convert them from being potential spoilers of the reform to active supporters? How did you foster ownership of the decentralization reform, especially when bringing in "external experts"?

In Ukraine, at the initial stage of the reform, we could see a lot of resistance from the *rayon* (district) elites who had power to lose. What helped convince them was the confidence of the national leadership – that this reform is unavoidable, and will happen by all means – then people who are opposed to it will start to change their mind to find their place under the sun. Many of them went to work in the municipalities of Local Self-Government. Then through word of mouth others do the same. The common vision of the reform helped structure the communication process. It was not convincing, but showing different lines of interest to the elites – those who were most flexible and dynamic found their way and joined the progressive movement. We had a very good pool of Ukrainian experts, the founding fathers of the reform, who were able to show people the benefits of the reform. It was not an easy or short process, we had a lot of fights in the debates we organized – I observed that some of the strongest opponents of the reform became the first to start leading amalgamated communities.

Q: What will happen to these lines of intervention (donor coordination and communications) now that the DESPRO project is closing?

The model of the Donor Board is now institutionalized and used in over 20 government reforms, and Switzerland supports the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine that facilitates this coordination process. As for communications, this is more of a challenge for us – some new ideas were

put on the table by the recent Impact Assessment of the Swiss support to decentralization in Ukraine, and we need to think of all possible options now.

Webinar Resources

DESPRO's Impact Assessment will be published shortly on the [DESPRO website](#).