

Knock, and the Door Will Open: How the Council of Europe helped improve governance in the Ukrainian Bessarabia

This is a story about small multi-ethnic communities at the extremity of Ukraine, who were strongly opposed to reforms, fearing that the reforms could threaten ethnic identity and traditions. What made them change their minds?

Bolhrad district is one of the nine south-west districts of the Odesa region in southern Ukraine. Bessarabia or Budzhak are the traditional names of this border area. Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Gagauz, Albanians, Moldovans, Lipovans and almost 20 other nationalities have been living here for centuries.

Three years ago, when the Ukrainian government launched large decentralisation and territorial consolidation reforms, most of the local officials of the Bolhrad district were very reluctant to introduce any changes. In spring 2017, a delegation of about 20 local authorities, councillors, medical professionals and teachers came to Kyiv to visit the Ministry for Communities and Territories and proposed...not to reform the local government in their area. They provided several reasons for their request:

"We were cautious about "decentralisation" as such. Some of the local politicians perceived the idea of municipal amalgamation in a negative way. They said this would lead to the closures of schools, health care facilities and cultural institutions. Villages would be deprived of centralised funding. It was often repeated that it would be impossible to amalgamate villages with residents of various national backgrounds. Although, here, in Karakut Village, Albanians, Bulgarians, Gagauz, Ukrainians, Moldovans, Russians and many others have been living as peaceful neighbours already for over 200 years. Being a mayor for 14 years I have never seen a conflict on ethnic grounds in the community." (Olena Zhecheva, Karakut Village Mayor).

"As reforms began in our district, future communities were identified based on economic criteria and accessibility of public services. However, there were attempts to slow down decentralisation process on the pretext of the ethnic composition of Bolhrad district's residents. Of course, peace and harmony always were and will remain important for the locals... poly-ethnicity is a strength of our communities". (Valeriy Abadzhiev, Head of Financial Directorate of the Bolhrad District).

Some of the reform opponents tried to explain their objections with claims that central authorities are forcing a "one size fits all" approach. And some wealthier communities told their neighbours that there was no sense for them to amalgamate with poorer ones. As a result, decentralisation and local government reform in the south-west of Odesa region unexpectedly came to a standstill.

At that time, at the request of the Ukrainian Government, the Council of Europe [Centre of Expertise for Good Governance](#) has started a targeted assistance programme in the region, in co-operation with many local partners, and as a part of a larger [Programme to support Decentralisation and local government reform in Ukraine](#). The Programme team analysed the problem and proposed to resolve it in a comprehensive way. It was decided to start with awareness-raising and overarching capacity building activities. There were numerous workshops, training sessions, peer to peer visits, public discussions and thematic meetings with local leaders and professionals from amalgamated communities from other Ukrainian regions where the reform process was advancing faster.

The Council of Europe experts were particularly impressed by their meeting with high school students in the Bolhrad district centre for creative development of youth. Unlike the adults, the schoolchildren were optimistic about the future, excited about innovations in education, and expressed their desire to live and work in their native territories after graduation.

Svitlana Rozhkova, Oksamytny Village Mayor, participated in a study visit to Volochysk amalgamated community of Khmelnytsky region: *"Volochysk community positively impressed me: high level of municipal management, wise and efficient administration of considerable funds, obtained as a result of voluntary amalgamation. They have cleaned up garbage in all their community and arranged the collection and recycling of plastic to be used for road construction. They have no disruptions in water supply anymore (and we still suffer from it) because they arranged water supply in a proper way and the service providers maintain relevant equipment in each village, in all 22 of them. They did not squander away money received from the state, but purchased modern, multifunctional equipment which would serve the community for many years. The community leaders were sincere and friendly; they eagerly shared their experience, in particular, in attracting investors, advised to hire professionals in specific areas... I only regret that we lost time and money, which could have been used to have the welfare of our residents improved by now"*.

The same delegation of local authorities and activists from the Bolhrad district returned to Kyiv once again in May 2020. But this time they came to demand the reform. While speaking in the Ukrainian Crisis Centre, they have presented evidence, shared compelling facts, proposed innovative and thoughtful ideas. Their arguments, perceptions and beliefs have evolved drastically since 2017:

"The municipal amalgamation process in our district has moved forward. The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved an amalgamation plan which provides for five amalgamated territorial communities in current Bolhrad district. This plan takes into account preferences of the vast majority. I thank all those who listened to the ideas expressed by the initiative group, studied problems in-depth, analysed all possible options, and those who finally approved the collective decision." (Olena Zhecheva, Karakut Village Mayor).

According to a letter recently sent by the 20 mayors and local authorities of the Bolhrad district, thanks to a number of activities carried out by the Council of Europe Programme "Decentralisation and local government reform in Ukraine", leaders of local authorities have significantly increased their awareness of local government reforms and strengthened their capacities to implement it. *"The decentralisation in Ukraine was founded on the cornerstone principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government...Subsidiarity, ubiquity, financial autonomy, and amalgamation of communities will give a new impetus to the development of settlements and preserve authentic cultures of ethnic groups living in this area"*.

Council of Europe, with its leading expertise in democracy and governance, has helped many member states implement a series of reforms in this area. Ukraine is one of the success stories: its decentralisation reform is among its most important achievements today. The reform aims to turn an archaic territorial organisation of power into a flexible and efficient system of multi-level governance, capable to ensure democracy and high-quality public services.

The Kyiv- and Strasbourg-based Programme team has cooperated closely with the Ministry for Communities and Territories, a Parliamentary Committee, the "Civil Society Institute", the U-LEAD project, and other institutions, in order to help, *inter alia*, design the best possible amalgamation plan

for the Odesa region and, in particular, for the Bolhrad district. As a result, this plan was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine in June 2020.

Article prepared in cooperation with Iryna Nagrebetska, independent journalist, with support of the Council of Europe Programme "Decentralisation and local government reform in Ukraine"