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A Country Without Self Confidence

-**"Why did you come here, to Ukraine?"**

Dima, my supervisor at Promel Company in Kiev, leans forward on his chair and looks questioning at me. The office is small but open and located in the end of a winding pale turquoise corridor. The reddish brick building is worn down by years without maintenance and the whole complex breathes a damp Soviet atmosphere, giving the badly lit hallways a scarily trapped feeling. It is my first day at work and I feel a little uncomfortable behind my crank desk. Dima is certainly not trying to make small talk; he is genuinely interested in the reason for which this pale blond girl decided to leave her safe and wealthy western paradise in favor for his old corrupted Soviet country.



Night train at the station

The difficulty to understand Ukraine's unique and wonderful features is mutual for all the Ukrainians I met; it seems like the nation suffers from a terribly low self esteem. And the problems are plentiful; saying something else would be a lie. Many of them, if not all in some way, springs from a for Ukrainians well-known phenomena; corruption. With an incredible efficiency it transfers money from the poorest in society to its very rich and powerful elite, undermining democracy and crushing peoples hope for a brighter future on its way.

-*"Corruption is in our souls. It's our reality"*, says Sergej, one of the friendly IAESTE students who kindly shows us, the lost Westerners, around in the jungle of Cyrillic letters and chaotic hustle that Kiev presents itself as these first days of July. He refers to the mentality that during all the Soviet years became part of the people here. Maybe our generation can leave it behind, he hopes, but the problem springs from much deeper sources than just the greed of the powerful elite he explains; many people in the low and middle class are dependent on corruption to be able to maintain decent living standards.

The politicians have promised change. But the orange flagged hope that filled the streets during those winter months of 2004 has carefully been crushed by broken promises and dishonest affairs in the corridors of power. Sweden seems almost ridiculously innocent in comparison. While *Toblerone affairs* and unpaid public TV-bills kicks people out of the parliament at home the current president in Ukraine is still on his post after being sentenced for rape of a young girl. And that is only the tip of the iceberg.

Hence, when the financial crises hit Ukraine, with an effect dwarfing the economical problems of the West, the government was questioned even more. The country was on the verge of collapse and Dima still doesn't know when he will get his next salary. Next week or in three months; it is hard to plan your expenses in that kind of reality.

Here, in the middle of everyday gripes and political betrayal, we live, me and nine other students from all over of Europe. The colors of the sixteen-story buildings in our block have faded since their new built prime in the Soviet years. The *babushkas* are growing vegetables in the courtyard, the children are roller-skating on the uneven pavement and the men are drinking beer on a shady bench; it is a lively neighborhood that at once made me feel at home.



Residential area in Kiev

Furthermore, the IAESTE internship undoubtedly feels like the best way for me to experience Ukraine. With a constant

presence of great newly-found friends and a new journey, excursion or party to look forward to I cannot imagine a better way to spend a summer. Sharing people's everyday lives allows you to peer in to their reality and the issues occupying their minds; it gives you the opportunity to get to know the country as it knows itself.

Energy is a constant subject for discussion here. Even so, climate change is hardly ever the worry that brings the question up over the lunch time *borsch*. Instead it is the scarcity of domestic energy sources that has put the energy security issue high on the political agenda, not only in Ukraine but also in Western Europe, when Russia at times simply has turned off the gas to the Ukrainian (and hence to the Central European) pipes.

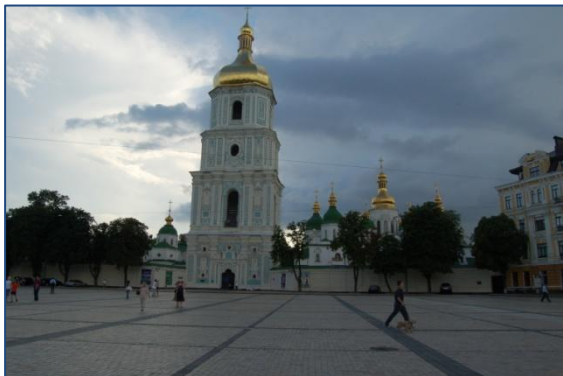
As a student of Energy Systems Engineering I am an eager listener at the lunch table; I could not imagine a more interesting country for my internship! The fact that the Promel Company also manufactures control system for heaters and boilers I merely take as a bonus.

We often discuss renewable energy at work, me and Dima. Wind power, solar power and biomass; Ukraine has the potential and a paining need for alternative energy but no resources. In time, I am thinking. This is where the future lies for people like me.

The relationship to Russia is tremendously important to Ukraine not only because of their energy dependency; for the eastern parts of the country the powerful big brother is the source of everything from language, culture and tradition to military security. However, the Western parts of the country have a very different opinion, making the dilemma a constant political topic ever since Ukraine's independence in 1991. The uncertainty of the nation's role in the world is obvious; the historic comradeship

with Russia conflicts the uncertain but thrilling liberation from the World Power that a membership in the European Union could bring. While still finding safety in the east Ukraine is indeed hopelessly admiring the west.

The split concerns Ukraine's past as well as its future. Some people say that it was better then, before the harsh reality of capitalism prevailed. Compromising the historical heritage of communism with a contemporary vibrant world of capitalism is full of contradictions and contrasts. *Rodina Mat*, maybe the most propagandistic of all Ukraine's Soviet monuments, is being restored to the tunes of communistic march music only a few blocks away from the rebuilding of the churches in *Kiev Perchersk Lavra* that the same regime demolished in there atheistic spirit; rusty *Ladas* are parked next to polished limousines on streets where luxurious shopping centers are rising next to cracking concrete complexes.



Saint Sophia Cathedral

Ever how dark the political intrigues, the corruption and the contradictions might seem can they still not bring shade over the Ukrainian people's hearts. I cannot help becoming tremendously inspired by their drive and will-power.

-*"I want to be able to give my kids the childhood I never got"*, says Sasha. We meet at an IAESTE party a late evening in July. We are the same age and he is, just like me, in the middle of his studies. The

difference between us is that he has a goal to fight for and he is willing to sacrifice everything it takes to achieve his aim. I never had a goal like that, and I believe many other young people in Western Europe would say the same. Goals and aims can make the greyest days meaningful I am thinking, walking home in the warm Kiev night. Everyone needs a goal.



Dnepr shore in the evening

It was Sasha and other young people in Ukraine that convinced me that this county has a great future ahead of it. They are young enough not to remember the suppression of Soviet and they are filled with dreams, aims and a will-power.

Hence, sitting in my parent's garden gazing out over the lush Swedish idyll which I blindly have neglected so many times, I know what I should have answered Dima that hot humid morning 6 weeks ago.

I came to Ukraine to be inspired, to open my eyes and take off my Western blinders. To learn, live and try to understand. And to fall in love with a country that has not yet learned to love itself.

But I didn't know it then.