



On the road to reform

WORDS BY IAN BEARDER

Despite the ongoing conflict in Ukraine's eastern regions, the 2013/14 revolution in Ukraine kickstarted a period of social, political and economic reform which is bringing widespread change to a country that has, in my opinion, been habitually mismanaged by consecutive governments since independence in 1991.

Behind the headline-grabbing stories of war and violence, 90 per cent of the country is peaceful and safe, and Ukrainians have been remarkably stoic in their efforts to pull their country back from the brink of economic collapse.

However, the challenge of reforming Ukraine into a modern European state is monumental, not just because of its size but also because of the poor state of its existing infrastructure which has been chronically underfunded and poorly maintained for the past 20-30 years.

Covering an enormous 600,000km², Ukraine is two and a half times the size of the UK and is the largest European country by area. It has a 1,400km border with EU countries and contains 170,000km of roads, a 22,000km rail network and 1,600km of waterways. Four out of ten European transport corridors pass through Ukraine and a number of large ports provide freight access to the Black Sea. However, when considering transport in Ukraine, big is not always beautiful.

WORST ROADS IN EUROPE?

Built mostly in the 1960s and 70s, Ukraine's roads are notoriously bad. There are just 200km of motorway in the entire country. This is enough to get you from Kiev's new airport to the city centre but once you arrive, the potholes are never ending. Only half of Ukraine's roads meet minimum standards and another 40 per cent require major rebuilds. To anyone who



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has ever driven in Ukraine even these figures seem optimistic. Except for a few roads connecting main cities, the others are almost universally bad.

Poor lighting, inadequate signage, reckless driving and poor law enforcement create serious safety problems, while many thousands of LADAs and other Soviet-era cars still chug along the country's roads pumping out unfiltered exhaust fumes. Smart transport planning simply doesn't exist. Ukraine is the only country in Europe for which Audi does not produce satellite navigation maps.

Last year a local logistics services company called Sovtes used data from their systems to compare the shortest routes to key cities with the actual routes taken. Their analysis showed an average difference of 15.5%. For example the shortest route from Kiev to Dnipropetrovsk is 451km but the optimal route is 80km further at 531km. And from Kiev to Ivano-Frankivsk, the optimal route, at 761km is 166km - that's more than a hundred miles - further than the shortest.

THE BUMPY ROAD TO REFORM

Constitutional change has just given Ukraine's regional authorities a much greater degree of autonomy including responsibility for a large number of the roads in their towns and cities - replacing the previously centralised system of management that was controlled in Kiev.

This has been welcomed as a positive step but, as activists have highlighted, a new five per cent local

gas tax which has been earmarked for local roads is barely enough to keep roads in good shape. Many roads need rebuilding altogether so a much greater level of finance will be required from the national budget if the situation is to improve.

Work is also underway to improve the rules for infrastructure development. Currently they enshrine inappropriate standards making it exceptionally difficult to implement changes or improvements. For example, the standard lane width for city roads is the same as for a highway - 4.25 to 4.75m - wide enough for two cars. Small roundabouts are not allowed and the code contains just two paragraphs on cycle-paths, setting inappropriate standards for their construction. Now, thanks to lobbying from groups such as the Kiev Cyclists Association (AVK), campaigners are confident the code will be updated with new standards later this year, paving the way for the construction of a new infrastructure over the next five to 10 years.

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITIES

With so much work to do, opportunities exist at almost every level. If you consider that bus tickets are still validated using a hole-punch, you'll get some idea of the potential for technological change. There are currently no speed cameras (although legislation's been passed allowing them again after they had been branded unconstitutional), almost no electronic signs/info boards and no traffic monitoring systems etc. Yet they are all desperately needed.

Sharing professional expertise, technical solutions and European best-practices, the UK and Europe can play an important role in helping to improve the lives of millions of Ukrainians and, in doing so, they would create strong personal and economic ties with this large, ambitious and talented country.