

**Commencement 2015:
Awarding of the Open Society Prize to the International Renaissance Foundation**

**George Soros
Founder and Honorary Chairman
Central European University**

It is with great pleasure and pride that I present this year's Open Society Prize to the International Renaissance Foundation of Ukraine. The Foundation was founded in 1990, two years before Ukraine regained its independence and it will celebrate its 25th anniversary later this year.

During these 25 years the Foundation has established itself as an important institution and a unifying force of Ukrainian society. It did not participate directly either in the Euromaidan protest movement or in the Orange Revolution in 2004; but it supported those who participated by protecting their civil rights and providing them with medical and legal aid, as well as looking after the families of those who sacrificed their lives.

Russian President Vladimir Putin made a fatal mistake when he ordered Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to use force against the protestors. This happened twice, in November 2013 and February 2014. Each time people, instead of running away, rushed to the Maidan. The second time, when the military police, the Berkut, used live ammunition, the people turned on the police and it was the police that ran away. Such a victory can serve as a nation-founding event and that was what happened. A new Ukraine was born, which is determined to be the opposite of the old Ukraine, which was demoralized and riddled with corruption.

The new Ukraine is led by the cream of civil society: young people, many of whom studied abroad and refused to join either government or business on their return because they found both of them repugnant. Most of these people found their place in academic institutions, Ukrainian subsidiaries of foreign corporations, think tanks and NGOs. They were willing to risk their lives on the Maidan for the sake of a better future for their country and they are now leading the new Ukraine, both inside and outside the government. They are determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past, including the squabbling and political infighting that undermined the Orange Revolution. When I meet them, practically all of them tell me that they are connected with the foundation in one way or another: they or a member of their family studied at the CEU or elsewhere with a foundation grant, or received some other kind of support.

Many of those in government and Parliament are volunteers who have given up well-paying jobs either in Ukraine or abroad to help their country on a volunteer basis because the government salaries they are receiving now are only a tiny fraction of what they were earning before. The volunteer spirit that was born on Maidan has spread to the general population. It has turned the new Ukraine into an experiment in the purest form of open society, participatory democracy, with thousands of people participating at the local level.

When I look at the new Ukraine, I am impressed by how qualified and mature its leadership is. 25 years of investment in education has produced impressive results. That is one reason why the foundation deserves the Open Society Prize.

The other reason is the contribution the International Renaissance Foundation is making currently. Spontaneous revolts occur quite frequently: the Arab spring touched off a wave of revolts that has spread worldwide. It is less often that revolts endure; usually their energy is exhausted after a while. That is what happened with the Orange Revolution. It is quite unusual when a protest movement is transformed into constructive, nation-building activities. That is the case in Ukraine now and the foundation played a central role. In partnership with the government and the EBRD, they organized a workshop on the weekend following the downing of the Malaysian airliner with about 220 participants including about 30 Ukrainian expatriates and 20 foreign experts. They formed the core of what became the Strategic Advisory Groups or SAGs attached to various ministries. Eventually, the SAGs were incorporated into the National Reform Council that determines the legislative agenda. The NRC brought together the President, the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and leaders of the Parliament and civil society. After a rocky start, it is now functioning smoothly and has become the motor of reforms. Until recently, the foundation was the sole financial supporter of the SAGs and the NRC. Now the EBRD and others are also contributing.

This accomplishment is largely the work of Yevhen Bystrytsky, the executive director, and Oleksandr Sushko, the chairman of the board, and I am delighted that they are here to accept the award on behalf of the International Renaissance Foundation of Ukraine.