Civic education that instills a sense of political responsibility and fosters active citizenship is essential for democracy to flourish. It is crucial that young people have the access, knowledge and abilities necessary to participate in their own government, and that a culture is built that fosters and recognizes the importance of their participation. IFES Ukraine works with universities across Ukraine to provide students with a modern civic education course that builds students understanding of democratic government, builds practical skills, and encourages practical exercises of responsible citizenship outside of the classroom.

IFES’ innovative and interactive university-level civic education course, “Democracy: From Theory to Practice,” is tailored for Ukraine and is inspired by an IFES civic education course that has had significant success in Georgia. The course was introduced by IFES in 2011 at select Georgian universities and is now offered at a majority of accredited universities across the country with significant ongoing demand from students, teachers and rectors.

During the 2018/2019 academic year, the course piloted at eight Ukrainian universities. They are: Vasyl Stus Donetsk National University, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ivan Horbachevsky Ternopil State Medical University, V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Lviv Polytechnic National University and the Yaroslav Mudriy National Law University.

In the current 2019/2020 academic year, 14 more universities joined the project. The course will now be taught at 22 universities in 12 regions of Ukraine.

New partner universities are the Kharkiv National University Of Radio Electronics, the Kyiv National Economic University, the National Academy of Public Administration attached to the Office of the President in Kharkiv, the Regional Institute of Public Administration, the National Aerospace University - Kharkiv Aviation Institute, the National University Odessa Academy of Law, the National University Odessa Maritime Academy, the Oles Honchar Dnipro National University, the Petro Mohyla Black Sea State University, the Poltava Law Institute of Yaroslav the Wise National Law University, the Poltava University of Economics and Trade, Sumy State University, the Ternopil Ivan Puluj National Technical University, Uzhhorod National University and the Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University.

The course objective is to foster students’ democratic values and attitudes and equip them with knowledge and skills essential for effective democratic citizenship. IFES uses a three-pronged educational approach and the following tools:

1) Course curriculum and text materials;
2) Interactive civic education teaching methodologies; and,
3) A civic action project conducted by students.

Student of V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University speaks about his experience studying in the “Democracy: From Theory to Practice” course.
The course curriculum and text materials are based on theoretical, historical and practical knowledge. The knowledge-based components of the course cover democratic governance, human rights, civil society and citizen engagement. Cross-cutting themes include gender equality, elections, minority rights, inclusion of and accessibility of persons with disabilities, enfranchisement, good governance, rule of law, media literacy, digital participation, diversity, money in politics, the role of youth and corruption.

To strengthen students’ skills – including critical thinking, active listening, consensus building, public speaking, group work, and problem solving – IFES’ civic education initiative emphasizes the primacy of interactive teaching methodology, which is contrary to a traditional lecture-style format. Course professors, selected by participating universities, receive training on interactive teaching methods through a series of IFES-led professional development sessions from national and international experts.

The capstone component of the course is a student action project. Through a step-by-step, guided process, students identify an issue in society that they recognize as problematic which they then research and relate to course topics. Ultimately, students are challenged to develop an action plan to address the issue. Through first-hand experience, students will begin to calibrate knowledge, dispositions and necessary skills for active, informed citizenship.

Throughout the project, IFES/Ukraine monitors its implementation and develops a comprehensive pilot-semester evaluation report. Results to date demonstrate students are gaining knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to effectively monitor and hold the government and members of society accountable to liberal democratic principles. Beyond the knowledge and skills developed, students also demonstrate a desire to be active citizens and a sense of value that they can play a role in moving democracy forward in Ukraine.

Students who participated in the course have gained a deeper understanding of democracy and the roles of government and individuals:

“We thought that democracy was something for above, but thanks to the course, it became clear that democracy begins with each of us and we can influence it.”

- Course Student

Students enrolled in the course practiced skills associated with effective democratic participation.

“We learned to express opinions, listen to others, find compromises.”

- Course Student

“In addition to skilful use of facts, [student] discussions started to develop ideas, their thoughts became more profound. Moreover, they learned to express themselves more freely.”

- Course Instructor

Students enrolled in the course developed attitudes and values that support a healthy democracy.

“We often say: ‘the state must’ or ‘society must’… we seem to be separated from all this. It sounds like someone is obligated to do something for us. My course helped me to understand the role of individual participation of a person as a citizen in the life of the university, city, society.”

- Course Student

Sustainability ensures lasting impact from this civic education initiative. IFES, university administrators, educators, Ukrainian government and nongovernment stakeholders and international partners will pursue and identify Ukraine-specific strategies for safeguarding the quality and longevity of this initiative. Strategies may include developing a national network of university-level civic educators and creating a student alumni association.