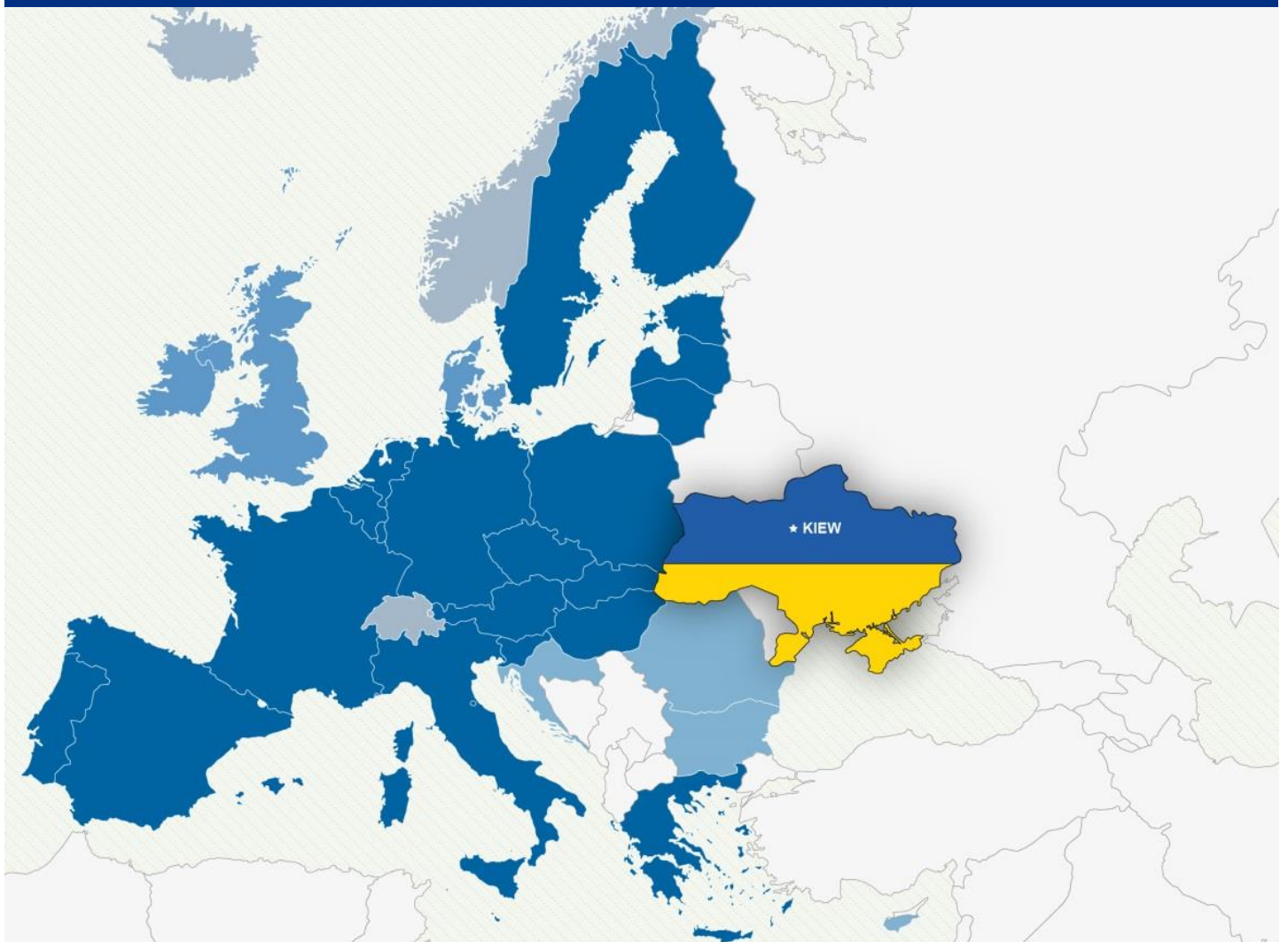


Society – the decisive player in Ukrainian politics?

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Society – the decisive player in Ukrainian politics?

The scale of the protests that started in November 2013 was a surprise even for the most experienced observers of Ukraine's political and social life. One might think that the disillusionment after the Orange Revolution provoked growing apathy in society, which wasn't able to be as active as it was at the end of 2004 and the beginning of 2005. Why did such an immense eruption of protest explode in autumn 2013? An answer should be looked for in the current political situation as well as in deeper social and political processes that have taken place in Ukraine over the last 25 years. It seems to be more and more visible that society is becoming the decisive player in Ukrainian politics. One could say that this should be an obvious situation. It is evident in democratic countries, however, but not in many post-soviet countries – Russia and Belarus, for instance.

The current political development in Ukraine shows that in 2014 this country is facing the most difficult period in its history of being an independent state, which began in 1991. The authorities, which carry out anti-democratic actions, are determined to stay in power using all means possible to achieve their goal. Thus, the next few months will be a battle between the ruling elite and the political opposition. The main question is: what will the role of society be, in particular its active part, in this difficult and decisive period for the future of Ukraine? A short analysis of Ukrainian society over the last 25 years and some reflections on the current political situation are needed to answer this question.

The phenomena of Ukrainian society

Ukrainian society is rather atypical in comparison with the societies of many other post-Soviet countries. The political activity of Ukrainian society as a whole shouldn't be overestimated, but in contrast to Russia and Belarus there is a stable critical mass in Ukraine interested in and capable of significantly influencing the political situation, sometimes even decisively. This doesn't mean that there are no active and politically motivated groups in Russian or Belarusian society, although in the latter they are very feeble and in the former they are growing but are still too

weak and fragmented to decisively influence the political situation. One of the reasons for this difference is that the level of fear and apathy is much lower in Ukrainian society than in Belarusian and Russian societies.

The foundations of Ukrainian society over the last two decades of an independent Ukraine is an extremely interesting phenomenon. Society could not be founded on a linguistic, religious, or ethnic basis as is too heterogeneous. It seems that the Ukrainians (the active part of society) have become more and more of a political nation based on opposition to the authoritarianism of the rulers, supporting more or less European values and democracy. The support for democracy in Ukraine is not very high but much higher than the support for the authoritarian system. According to a public opinion survey conducted in December 2013, 51 per cent of Ukrainians support democracy as the best political system for their country while 21 per cent think that autocracy is the best solution. The regional differences for the support of democracy are interesting: Western Ukraine – 77 per cent, Southern Ukraine – 56 per cent, Central Ukraine – 52, Eastern Ukraine – 36.¹ Only in the Eastern part of Ukraine – the homeland of Viktor Yanukovich and his Party of Regions – are less than 50 per cent

of the people supporters of democracy, while most of the people from other parts of Ukraine support a democratic model for their country. One can risk posing a thesis that there is growing contradiction between the expectations of society and the reality of the political system in Ukraine, which is becoming more and more autocratic.

But it should be borne in mind that President Yanukovich and the Party of Regions are still supported by a significant part of society in Eastern and Southern parts of Ukraine. According to an opinion survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in November 2013, more than a quarter (27%) of people in Eastern Ukraine and 21 per cent in Southern Ukraine claim that they will vote for the Party of Region in the next elections to the Ukrainian parliament. On the other hand, this party only has four per cent support in Western Ukraine and 12 per cent in Central Ukraine.² This is a sign of the old division between pro-European Western and Central Ukraine and pro-Russian Eastern and Southern Ukraine. However, it should be noted that there are already visible groups of pro-European orientation in Eastern and Southern parts of Ukraine. Therefore, one can say that this division of Ukraine between West and centre on the one hand and East and

¹ http://dif.org.ua/en/polls/2014_polls/dva-misjaci-protestiv-v-ukraini-sho-dali--zagalnonacionalne-opituvannja.htm

² <http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=208&page=1>

South on the other, is a stable phenomenon but with slowly changing proportions in favour of pro-European orientation. Research conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs in the middle of 2013 shows that in three out of four regions (Western, Central, and Southern) support for EU integration is higher than for the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Only in Eastern Ukraine is the percentage of people willing to integrate their country with the Customs Union higher than those who support EU integration of Ukraine. Nevertheless, the scale of support makes a difference. The support in favour of the EU is higher in Western and Central Ukraine than the support in favour of the Customs Union in the East of Ukraine.³

It is worth risking the thesis that pro-European people are rather active and future oriented, while the pro-Russian (interested in integration with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan) part of society is rather passive and past-oriented. One cannot imagine several hundred thousands of protesters who would spontaneously gather to support integration with Russia. But this is the reality in the case of the pro-European and pro-democratic manifestations.

A long tradition of protests' movements

Maidan 2013-2014 can be inscribed on the list of politically motivated protests that have taken place in Ukraine in the last 25 years. However, it should be strongly underlined that it is not only the well-known Orange Revolution in 2004-2005 that has taken place before today's Maidan. The list of politically motivated protests in Ukraine is much longer.

At the turn of the 21st century, Ukraine was shaken by massive protests named *the Ukraine Without Kuchma* movement. In 1999 Leonid Kuchma, the president of Ukraine at the time, had won his second presidential election and was preparing to rule the country for the next five years. Harsh economic conditions radicalised the citizens' attitude towards the authorities, although this did not escalate into massive demonstrations. The turning point was provoked by the events of late 2000. In September 2000, Georgiy Gongadze, co-founder and editor of an online Ukrainian newspaper *Ukrainska Pravda*, widely known as a tracer of corruption among the most prominent oligarchs and politicians, also from the presidential circle, disappeared in Kyiv. His beheaded body was found the following November,

³ For complex results please read: J. Fomina, J. Kucharczyk, J. Konieczna-Sałamatin, Ł. Wenerski, Poland – Ukraine, Poles – Ukrainians. A look across the bor-

der, available at: <http://isp.org.pl/uploads/files/lemaanage/pdf/SpojrzzenieprzezgranicENGsummary.pdf>

and President Kuchma was accused of ordering Gongadze's kidnap. In turn, this caused citizens to become extremely angry at the supposed ruthlessness and brutality of the authorities, provoking people to take to the streets and start protesting. The first protests started in December 2000, with demonstrators demanding the resignation of President Kuchma and a proper investigation into the Gongadze case. It soon turned into long-lasting campaign supported by the opposition parties and students. There were tents on Maidan, people living on the main square – a microscale of which is visible today on "Euromaidan". The peak of the protests was on 9 March 2001 – the anniversary of Taras Shevchenko's birthday, when units of the most active demonstrators and riot police clashed. Protesters stormed the building of the presidential administration and the Ministry of Interior, but without success. Instead, participants were beaten and prosecuted. The scale of the March action, and the brutal repercussions led to decreasing support for the movement. Although the protest failed in the end, it can be treated as a trigger for crystallising new opposition leaders, who would have played a decisive role in the Orange Revolution.⁴

Earlier still, in Soviet Ukraine, the *Revolution On Granite* took place –

a massive protest and hunger strike by students and pupils, organised in October 1990. The protesters only spent 16 days on the October Revolution Square (now Maidan of Independence) in Kyiv, where they installed a tent city, but this had a crucial influence on future internal changes in Soviet Ukraine. The aim of the action was to reach the authorities of Soviet Ukraine with demands including: the re-election of the Verkhovna Rada based on a multi-party approach; the resignation of Leonid Kuchma, who was at that time serving as the head of the Verkhovna Rada, and Vitaly Masol, head of the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian Communist Party of the Soviet Union; nationalisation of the Communist Party property as well as assets of the Komsol; ensuring that Ukrainian soldiers do their military service within Ukraine; and disagreement on signing the new agreement between the Soviet republics. Day by day, the students gathered more support not only from their colleagues in the universities and technical colleges, but also the wider support of citizens of Kyiv. Demonstrations were also organised in other Ukrainian cities – for example Lviv, Luhansk, and Donetsk. The authorities, rattled by the situation and the rising anti-government mood, decided to consider the students' demands. Although in the end the demands

⁴ To learn more about the Ukraine Without Kuchma movement please read: <http://ukrainianweek.com/Politics/19091>

were introduced only partially, the protest showed how great the potential of civil society in Ukraine is. What is more, the Granite Revolution was a first step towards adult politics for politicians such as Oleg Tyahnybok and Yuri Lutsenko.⁵

The description of the above-mentioned protest doesn't mean that there is continuity from one protest to another, as well as vivid consciousness and knowledge about these protests, particularly the students' revolution in 1990, in Ukrainian society, especially among the younger generation today. But it has to be underlined that all these protests show a constant readiness of a significant part of the people of Ukraine to manifest their opposition to the undemocratic behaviour of the authorities. Political forces in Ukraine, both the authorities and opposition parties, have to take this reality into account.

The differences between Maidan 2013-2014 and the Orange Revolution

Both Maidan 2013-2014 and the Orange Revolution are examples of massive politically motivated protests which gathered several hundred thousand people in Kyiv and provoked actions of support in many regions of Ukraine. But there is a long list of differences between these two protests that should be

examined to understand the current political situation in Ukraine correctly.

Maidan was initiated and organised by the younger generation and representatives of civil society as a manifestation of the pro-European aspirations of the protesters. They were not interested in the participation of political parties in their protest. The political opposition only joined the protest later and has been represented by three political leaders and their parties: Vitali Klitschko (UDAR), Arseniy Yatsenyuk (the Fatherland party of Yulia Tymoshenko), and Oleh Tyahnybok (Svoboda). The Orange Revolution was a political movement from the beginning with an undisputed political leader – Viktor Yushchenko, who was the most important representative of the political opposition at the time. It should be strongly underlined that anti-systemic elements absent in the Orange Revolution are visible in Maidan. The current protest is against the ruling elite but also keeps a distance towards the opposition parties.

The Orange Revolution had a clear goal that might or might not have been achieved in a few weeks, namely the re-run of the second round of the presidential elections in 2004, which was assessed as not-free and unfair not only by the opposition and its supporters, but

⁵ To learn more about the Revolution On Granite, a documentary film is available

at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oDNuDSBaGo>

also by the West. In turn, Maidan had various goals, which have since changed, without a clear deadline. At the beginning it was a protest against the decision of the Ukrainian authorities that had rejected the possibility of signing the Association Agreement with the EU and an attempt to change their position. Then, after the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius (28-29 November 2013) and the brutal action of the riot militia (Berkut) against students on the night of 30 November 2013, a new wave of protest, which gathered several hundred thousand people in Kyiv, has risen against the autocratic behaviour of the authorities, and new demands have emerged, namely the dismissal of the government and earlier parliamentary and presidential elections. For the protesters, the presidential elections scheduled for March 2015 are too far ahead in the future. One cannot imagine that the massive protest in the centre of the Ukrainian capital will last for more than a year, yet there is still no clear time framework.

The difference mentioned above is also an explanation of the difference in the duration of these two protests. The Orange Revolution only lasted about two months. Maidan has already existed for almost three months. In the case of the Orange Revolution one could see the relatively fast process of political negotiations in which the authorities and the opposition were more

or less ready for a compromise, meaning the re-run of the second round of presidential elections. Now, the authorities have imitated real dialogue with the opposition, which cannot in fact fully control Maidan's actions and mood. Therefore, the Orange Revolution was a peaceful protest from the beginning to the end, while Maidan has had a violent dimension.

The long duration of Maidan has provoked its growing radicalism. A part of the protesters are against further negotiations with President Yanukovych and the ruling elite as a whole. They support revolutionary changes. The Right Sector, a coalition of far-right organisations with some of them perceived as quasi-fascists militia, seems to represent this group of protesters. This new political movement is considered an initiator of the fight against units of the Ukrainian police and special forces of the Berkut on 19 January 2014 on Hrushevsky Street in Kyiv. The action of January 19 resulted in an unbelievable increase in the recognition of the Right Sector. Just after the clash, they had a dozen thousand followers on the website VKontakte (the Russian version of Facebook); on Wednesday 22 January, this had increased to almost 52,000. What needs to be emphasised is that even if the general views of the Right Sector do not find much support among society, in the current circumstances there is a significant number of people who silently

agree with their method of action. These people are simply discouraged with the ineffective talks coming out of Maidan; they are eager to see direct action and believe that a physical clash is the only solution.

It should be noted that there is generally a stronger presence of far-right activists and the visibility of nationalist symbols in Maidan than during the Orange Revolution. But this doesn't mean that Maidan is a nationalist protest of extreme forces, as is frequently described by the Ukrainian authorities. And one has to understand that there are significant differences between far-right movements. On the one hand, Svoboda is treated by the Right Sector as liberals and the systemic opposition, while on the other, Svoboda is trying to show its human face and does not want its activists to be engaged in riots and be treated as a provocateur of clashes.⁶

And last, but certainly, not least, the difference between the Orange Revolution and Maidan is the role of new technology and the growing use of the Internet. It is often noted that the Orange Revolution was the first protest of the Internet era in Ukraine. Maidan, however, is much more deeply linked to new technology than the Orange Revolution. Progress in IT technology has

given the people of Ukraine a new weapon that was not available during the Orange Revolution and the other massive Ukrainian protests – well developed social networks. Facebook, Twitter, online brands of the most prominent Ukrainian journals, as well as online TV channels are readily available and Ukrainian activists tend to exploit them in every possible way.

Facebook is the main source. It serves not only as an information platform where the only thing you have to do to follow the news about Ukraine is to “like” the Facebook profiles of the best Ukrainian journals, thematic, or journalists’ profile. Facebook is a place where people communicate their willingness to go out and protest with each other, seek other people to join them in protest, and give their own expression about what is going on during day and night on Maidan. People organise themselves every time it is necessary via Facebook. They did so, for example, during the the night of 11 December 2013, when Ukrainian police and Berkut seemed to storm the Maidan – the action Everybody on Maidan was spread so widely and effectively that people even started to discuss who was driving from what part of Kyiv and how many people he/she could carry in his/her car. One could even perceive the

⁶ http://gazeta.ua/ru/articles/politics/_otvetstvennost-za-sobytiya-na-ulice-grushevskogo-vzyala-na-sebya-organizaciya-pr/537135;

<http://www.nr2.ru/kyiv/480770.html>;
<http://www.profi-forex.org/novosti-mira/novosti-sng/ukraine/entry1008195792.html>

Facebook announcement by Ukrainska Pravda journalist Mustafa Nayem as a trigger for the entire Euromaidan and the first protests. It was Nayem who first published, just after Viktor Yanukovich's statement that Ukraine would not sign the Association Agreement, the announcement to take to the streets and start a pro-European demonstration.⁷ Anyone registered on Facebook can also follow Maidaners – a profile containing the histories of ordinary Ukrainians who have decided to take part in the protest on Independence Square, and read about their feelings and motivations, etc.⁸ The profile was only available in Ukrainian at the beginning, but it is now possible to follow it in English, Russian, Polish, and other languages. Online TV stations such as Hromadske.tv⁹ and Espresso.tv¹⁰ are also very interesting and important sources of information.

It should also be strongly underlined that the authorities don't have the information advantage over society as they had in the past. This phenomenon changes the situation dramatically in comparison with the pre-IT technology era.

The year 2014 – society against the authorities and with the opposition?

The situation in Ukraine is changing very quickly and is almost unpredictable. One can, therefore, try to write many scenarios, but these are just general remarks rather than scenarios.

First, January 2014 has shown that the protests are not just limited to Kyiv, but society is very active in many Ukrainian regions manifesting their anti-governmental position. This phenomenon has changed the situation dramatically. It seems that the protests outside Kyiv were decisive and saved Maidan. The central authorities have lost control or have limited control over one-third of the country. It will be an extremely difficult for Yanukovich to restore full control over these parts of Ukraine, especially over Western Ukraine. It should be strongly underlined that the authorities and the opposition will not be able to reach a political solution without society and its acceptance, as ignoring society will lead to more protests, which could become uncontrollable. It seems that both the ruling elite, part of it at least, and the main opposition forces understand this danger more and more.

⁷ To learn more watch an interview with Mustafa Nayem at: <http://video.orange.mu/news/the-interview-mustafa-nayem-ukrainian-journalist-and-activist-2/>

⁸ To learn more about Maidaners visit: www.facebook.com/maidaners

⁹ <http://hromadske.tv/>

¹⁰ <http://espresso.tv/>

Second, actions undertaken by the authorities, President Yanukovich, and the government after the beginning of Maidan in November 2013 can be assessed as a long list of enormous mistakes that provoked the escalation of the protests and tension in society. The ruling elite would like to govern Ukraine as a whole, just like they ruled Donbas from the 1990s (Yanukovich was appointed governor of Donetsk oblast in 1997), but this is simply impossible as people in many other parts of Ukraine, not only in Western regions, are strongly against the bandit methods used by the current authorities. The authorities would like to impose fear as a tool to pacify society, although this will certainly not work. What it shows is that the ruling elite is not able to understand the mood and position of the majority of Ukrainian society and want to impose methods used by the Russian or Belarusian authorities. They don't understand the basic rules of democracy and want to stay in power forever. Thus, they are anachronistic in comparison to the growing number of Ukrainians. This creates even more trouble for Ukraine, as the ruling elite (at least the hawks among them) cannot think about a compromise. But it doesn't mean that they cannot win and overcome society's aspirations, although it seems that they are not able to pacify society for a long time, and further protests will later erupt.

Third, the authorities can only mobilise people from Donbas (the Donetsk and Luhansk regions) and Crimea against pro-European and pro-democratic protesters, but even in these regions a vivid reaction of the inhabitants as a whole cannot be expected. However, they can provoke resentment between Western and Central Ukraine on the one hand, and Eastern and Southern Ukraine on the other. Irrespective of their political position, West Ukrainians could be portrayed as nationalists, fascists, and extremists.

Fourth, cooperation between civil society, the younger generation on the one hand and the political opposition and its leaders on the other, will be one of the most difficult challenges, especially if the protests are prolonged due to a lack of solution at the political level. The anti-systemic dimension of Maidan will probably still exist in the subsequent months and could even grow. This would create negative circumstances for both the political opposition and society.

Fifth, the problems in relations between the political opposition as a whole and the protesters (the younger generation, representatives of civil society) could provoke tension between the three main political leaders and parties. Serious quarrels between opposition leaders are possible in the upcoming months.

Finally, the far-right movement, the Right Sector, will still be visible but cannot achieve much more support in Ukrainian society. However, their visibility could spoil the opposition's image inside and outside Ukraine. This is certainly a very important challenge for the pro-democratic and pro-European forces in Ukrainian society. Nevertheless, despite the radicalism, Maidan in Kyiv and the manifestations in other Ukrainian cities have been the protests of the pro-democratic and pro-European part of Ukrainian society against the authoritarianism of the authorities.

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Taking into account the growing role of society in the political process in Ukraine, EU proposals for this country should be oriented not only towards the political opposition and the authorities, but more and more towards society. European Union support for the pro-European part of Ukrainian society should first of all include a clear statement on Ukraine's European aspirations according to article 49 of the Treaty on the European Union. The EU should make a political statement that a visa free regime for Ukrainians will be introduced when the Ukrainian authorities fulfil the obligations of the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan. These two statements would enormously increase the EU's credibility in the eyes of Ukrainian society.

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