

THE RADICALIZATION OF POST-MAIDAN UKRAINE

BY
PETER
ZALMAYEV

On the fourth anniversary of Euromaidan, Kyiv faced yet another round of popular protests pressing for change. These demonstrations took place over the course of five months in the form of an encampment by the Rada, Ukraine's Parliament. They were much smaller in scale than those that ignited the 2013–14 revolution, but the protesters were just as angry. They accused President Petro Poroshenko and his government of betraying the spirit of Euromaidan and demanded that the current leadership make way for genuine reformers.

Most of the protesters—whose numbers dwindled from the initial several hundred to a few dozen by the time the camp was dismantled by riot police on March 3, 2018—were followers of opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili, formerly president of Georgia and briefly governor of Odesa. The rest were members of the ultranationalist Svoboda Party and the conservative Samopomich Party.

The hostilities in eastern Ukraine have further fanned the flames of popular discontent by recycling former fighters back into civilian life and politics. Several of the most radical soldier-cum-populist politicians who have

“Barricade with the protesters at Hrushevskogo street on January 25, 2014, in Kiev, Ukraine. The anti-governmental protests turned into violent clashes during last week” photo by Sasha Maksymenko, licensed under CC-BY-SA 3.0.



demobilized in the last three years came from nationalist and often xenophobic private battalions. The latter proliferated at the start of the hostilities in the Donbas, to make up for the army's woeful lack of fighting capacity.

In January, Kyivan residents were stunned by the sight of several hundred well-built men clad in identical paramilitary gear, many of them wearing balaclavas, marching down central Khreschatyk Street. They were apparently members of the "National Corps" of Andrei Biletsky, an ultranationalist member of parliament (MP) and former commander of the Azov battalion. Their slogans included the ominous, "Ukraine needs Ukrainian order!"

Of all the movement's leaders, Saakashvili in particular has attempted to shape this militant protest energy by trying to unite the disparate elements of radical opposition under the banner of his Movement of New Forces.

Though his early reforms earned him the reputation of a democratizer in Georgia, Saakashvili drifted toward an authoritarian-like model during his second presidential term. In Ukraine, where he was granted citizenship and appointed governor of Odesa by his former university buddy, President Poroshenko, he ran out of reformist steam after a series of setbacks and a general inability to reform the notoriously corrupt region. Rather than acknowledge defeat, the Georgian firebrand decided to go rogue on his now former friend and benefactor, declaring the entire ruling political class corrupt and eventually branding Poroshenko a traitor working in Putin's interest. Unsurprisingly, he was deported from Ukraine and

stripped of his short-lived Ukrainian citizenship in July 2017, only to charge back in over the border in September and surround himself with a group of between one and two thousand dedicated supporters. Ever since, he has resorted to revolutionary rhetoric and populist demagoguery. In February 2018, Saakashvili was deported from the country once again, but he has continued to rally his troops via social networks, promising a speedy and triumphant return.

Meanwhile, the slogans at his rallies in the center of Kyiv have acquired an increasingly radical character, with occasional anti-Semitic undertones. At one demonstration in early March 2018, a speaker described a "Zionist takeover of Ukraine" and called for an "ethnically pure Ukrainian nation." While Saakashvili never explicitly endorsed such views himself, it is often the case that he and his movement do not convincingly disavow the extremist rhetoric of their supporters.

At the same time, two MPs from the otherwise mainstream conservative Samopomich Party—Semyon Semenchenko and Egor Sobolev—held a rally attended by several hundred supporters, where they decried the ineffectuality of peaceful demonstrations, hinting that arms may be considered for future protest actions. Such pronouncements are especially dangerous in view of the several armed skirmishes that have taken place between police and protesters over the last three years. But, for fear of further inflaming tensions, the government has failed to hold such violent demagoguery criminally accountable, which inadvertently lends further weight to the perception of its weakness.





(Left to right) “Mikheil Saakashvili” photo by European People’s Party, licensed under CC-BY-SA 3.0. Ukraine’s President Petro Poroshenko at Columbia’s World Leaders Forum (September 29, 2015); photo courtesy of the World Leaders Forum.

The words and deeds of Ukrainian populists and radicals feed off legitimate popular demands, but they have added to the climate of disenchantment and distrust of all politicians, all reforms, and all institutions. They have also helped undermine support for the programs required by Western financial institutions as a condition for assistance to Ukraine’s economy and have provided ample fodder to Russian propaganda TV shows, parading Saakashvili’s escapades as evidence of Ukraine as a “failed state.”

Echoing the populist wave flooding Western liberal democracies, the protest leaders denounce Ukraine’s political elites as being out of touch with regular people,

hopelessly mired in corruption, and in cahoots with venal oligarchs. And their accusations are not far from the truth—five top Ukrainian oligarchs, President Poroshenko among them, are said to control nearly 10 percent of the country’s GDP. In comparison, the top ten Polish businessmen control only 3 percent of Poland’s GDP.

With the national currency, the hryvna, losing two-thirds of its value over the last four years; the parallel precipitous drop of living standards; the unrelenting Russian propaganda; and no end in sight for the war in the Donbas, the only surprise is that the demonstrators have attracted so few followers and that Poroshenko’s government remains in charge.



The only surprise is that the demonstrators have attracted so few followers and that Poroshenko's government remains in charge.

and populists. President Poroshenko's support is at a record low, but it seems that he may be banking on being reelected as the least of all evils. According to recent polls, populist slogans continue to fall on deaf ears, and most Ukrainians, at least for now, seem impervious to pie-in-the-sky promises from the opposition, such as a threefold raise in pensions or rollbacks in energy prices. The polls also show that the majority of Ukrainians are even more wary of the appeals of those political fringe elements that peddle the traditional tropes of Ukrainian nationalists with a wholesale demonization of the moneyed class, calls for a total ban on the Russian language, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

Euromaidan may have inaugurated Ukraine's decisive break with Russia and "Eurasianist" policies in favor of integration with Europe's political and economic institutions, but Ukraine's gains have not translated into a sense of well-being for the majority of Ukrainians. In 2014–15, after the loss of Crimea and industrial Donbas, where Ukraine has been fighting local insurgents and Russian mercenaries, the country's economy nose-dived with a cumulative GDP contraction of 16 percent. Since then the GDP per capita has been hovering under \$2,500 (though significantly higher if we include the black market, which makes up between 30 and 50 percent of the nation's GDP—the highest percentages in the region), making Ukraine Europe's second poorest country, after Moldova. Exacerbating the economic crisis are the disruption of trade with Ukraine's biggest trading partner, Russia, and an influx of 1.5 million internally displaced persons from eastern Ukraine.

It is no surprise, then, that a majority of Ukrainians have soured on the country's trajectory, believing that "nothing has changed," and that the political class lacks the will to root out corruption and implement genuine reforms.

The simple explanation for the dearth of revolutionary zeal is that Ukrainians are exhausted by the cataclysms of recent years and in no shape for another upheaval along the lines of Euromaidan. A more generous explanation, however, highlights Ukrainian wariness of staging another revolution during a do-or-die confrontation with their giant neighbor to the north. There is also the matter of the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019, which many believe may well be the best way to register their discontent.

A year before these elections, Ukrainian voters are disappointed and distrustful of the entire political elite—from mainstream politicians to extreme nationalists

According to the latest poll, 80 percent of respondents consider the war on corruption a lost cause.

Yet this pessimism belies the fact that a series of significant reforms have been enacted, notably in education and medicine, as well as in the pension system. Reform of the pricing structure of the state oil and gas company, Naftogaz, has allowed it to rid itself of many of the old corrupt schemes prevalent under presidents Kuchma, Yushchenko, and Yanukovich. Economic growth is projected to be 3 to 4 percent in 2018–19—impressive considering the precipitous drop in GDP in 2015–16. And last year, in acknowledgment of Ukraine’s efforts, the EU finally granted Ukrainians visa-free entry to its twenty-eight member states.

The pro-European, protransparency zeal of Euromaidan protesters has led to the creation of several anticorruption agencies, not yet fully independent of the government but vested with broad discretion to pursue violators. A law on the creation of an anticorruption court—among the EU’s and IMF’s long-standing demands—has been drafted and is pending the president’s signature. Purchases of goods, services, and works for public needs are now made transparently through a public e-procurement system, ProZorro—the result of painstaking collaboration brokered by Ukraine’s government, business sector, and civil society. And, finally, more than a million Ukrainian government officials have been subjected to one of the most comprehensive and detailed income and asset e-declaration procedures anywhere in the world. These require officials to itemize any personal object above \$3,000. (Of course, these reforms have famously resulted in retaliation from MPs, who have responded to the measures by requiring human rights activists and civil reformers to submit to a similarly stringent disclosure procedure, which they view as an intimidation tactic and an attack on civil society.)

Ukraine retains its robust, albeit fractious and divisive, system of democracy, where a denial of the effectiveness of any and all recent reforms is part and parcel of the

opposition’s intensifying presidential and parliamentary campaigns. Western aid programs, though, have been a double-edged sword—they are vital to Ukraine’s development, but their slow progress has engendered the belief that they are ineffective. In their pursuit of an uncompromising vision of instant and absolute transparency and justice, civic activists have attacked the ruling elite, often appearing to play politics, wittingly or not, which has boosted the government’s political opponents. Claiming that the e-declaration system has been inadequate, several of these activists have themselves refused to volunteer to submit to the procedure. Others have fallen victim to their own prescription, after failing to declare substantial assets, including, in several cases, lavish 2,000-square-foot apartments.

Ukraine’s fate hangs in the balance. Cool heads have prevailed so far, but populism and nationalism are awaiting the chance to fill the political void, as they have elsewhere in Europe. Unless President Poroshenko steals the initiative and reignites a reform process that made substantial progress in the first two years of his administration, the situation may spin out of control, encouraging Russia to increase its already significant efforts at destabilization.

Throughout his presidency, Poroshenko has urged Western leaders to support Ukraine as Europe’s main bulwark against “revanchist, barbarian” Russia. In his speech celebrating the visa-free status with the EU last June, he went so far as to mock Russia with lines from Mikhail Lermontov’s poem: “Прощай немытая Россия / Страна рабов, страна господ” (Farewell, unwashed Russia / land of slaves, land of lords).

Poroshenko would do well to temper this premature jubilation. Ukraine’s shift toward Europe has been dramatic, but it is far from assured and irrevocable. Indeed, amid rising public discontent and increasing populism, Europe’s future itself, as a federation of liberal democracies, is far from certain. And unless the Ukrainian president demonstrates the will to continue with difficult reforms, sometimes at the expense of his political allies, the forces of populism, nationalism, and xenophobia—for now still consigned to the margins—will step in and take Ukraine in an unknown direction, toward social chaos and political darkness.

As this was going to press, Ukrainian TV viewers were getting a shocking glimpse of what that political darkness may look like. Addressing MPs, Ukraine’s prosecutor general, Yuri Lutsenko, showed secretly taped footage

According to the latest poll, 80 percent of respondents consider the war on corruption a lost cause.



Peter Zalmayev, standing to the right of U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch, asking a question during a presentation by Newt Gingrich at the Victor Pinchuk Foundation in Kyiv (May 2017).

of their fellow MP, former POW Nadezhda Savchenko, in which she was huddled with two of her coconspirators in a cramped tiny apartment, discussing the various options for taking out the country's political elite. Savchenko's proposed solution: set off bombs inside the Rada during a presidential address. Ukraine may not have the luxury of continuing to waffle on the hard choices it needs to make, as other Savchenkos surely wait in the wings. ■

Peter Zalmayev is director of the Eurasia Democracy Initiative, a nonprofit organization. Currently, he divides his time between New York and Kyiv, where he takes active part in local civil society, hosts a weekly TV program, and provides frequent commentary to print and broadcast media on international and local political developments. He received his M.I.A. from Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs in 2008, along with a certificate from the Harriman Institute.