

INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES ON CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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# UKRAINE AFTER THE EUROMAIDAN

Challenges and Hopes

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## Ukraine's Revolution: The National Historical Context and the New Challenges for the Country and the World

Ten years after the 2004 “Orange” revolution, Ukraine again came to be in the main focus of European and world politics. The wave of protest movements, known as the Euro-Maidan, arose in Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities. The longest nation-wide protest marathon in the country’s modern history, lasting from November 2013 to March 2014, with the Kyiv’s Maidan Nezalesznosti (the capital’s central square) as its epicentre, became the trigger for the people’s uprising in January–February 2014 and the subsequent dramatic, albeit long-awaited, transformation of the country. The chain reaction of this transformation, concentrated in a brief period of time, involved many dramatic events: the killing of over a hundred protesters by special police, the collapse of Yanukovych’s repressive state apparatus after his flight from the country, the accession of Crimea to the Russian Federation, the pre-term election of the new president Petro Poroshenko in one electoral turnover (for the first time in Ukraine’s complex political history), radical separatism and the ensuing strange, “hybrid” war (officially still called an “anti-terrorist operation”) with many hundreds of militants and civilians killed on the Donbas, and all the complex socio-economic consequences of the country’s radical geopolitical turn towards Europe.

If the Maidan, a sort of Ukrainian contribution to the arsenal of the worlds’ protest movement and direct public engagement in policy-making, has repeatedly occurred over the last ten years, there must be deep and latent public dissatisfaction with the governmental politics, with the social, economic and political situation and with the conditions of the political regime in the country. The phenomenon of Ukraine’s Maidans also proves that Ukrainians, despite the historically rather lengthy corruptive impact of Russia’s imperial domination and the country’s Soviet heritage, still preserve the virtues of dignity, freedom and justice and cherish their love of independence and individual rights. And many of these characteristics

are usually associated with the European concept of natural rights. In our mind, the European identity is still retained deep in the Ukrainian psyche. Those feelings of being a part of Europe in many ways were also combined with the people's striving for their own independent state. Indeed, the pro-European and pro-independence parallels have closely coincided in many glorious and tragic episodes of national history, from the tradition of the early medieval Kyivan Rus', the Cossacks' glory of the seventeenth century to the Ukrainian People's Republic of 1917–1920, and continued in the struggle for an independent state by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army during the Second World War and in pro-Ukrainian activities by many hundreds of members of the Ukrainian intelligentsia and Soviet dissidents, imprisoned and killed by the communist regime in the period from 1920 to the 1980s. In this national historical continuity, following Ukrainian independence in 1991 the Maidans of 2004–2005 and 2013–2014 became another stage for Ukrainians' striving for their freedoms and also for a European future.

Indeed, without knowledge of the national historical context, it is hard to understand why the Ukrainians once again surprised both the Western world and national policymakers with their determined support of European Association. Democracy has always been an integral part of life of Ukrainian communities since the Middle Ages. We should remember that village residents elected not only a *Viyt* (from the German, *Vogt*), but also a priest for the local church, as well as a teacher who taught all the children in the community. It is also worth noting that this word of German origin referring to the mayor elected by the town or village is directly connected to the prevalence of Magdeburg Law in Ukraine from the fourteenth century onwards – a system of local self-government that at that time was widespread throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The easternmost city in Ukraine to follow this democratic legal system from 1664 on was Glukhiv, 300 kilometers northeast of Kyiv. The traditions of managing local self-government and living according to the law rather than the will of a master were inherent to the majority of the Ukrainian population for centuries.

For hundreds of years, Ukrainians have considered themselves part of the cultural and legal landscape that is currently called the European Union. That is why the manifestations in support of European integration that took place in winter 2013–2014 in almost all big cities in Ukraine from East to West were entirely natural and logical.

The European-oriented part of Ukrainian society (according to sociological surveys, the major part of the population) generally accepted the growing deterioration of life in Ukraine over the last three years, in their hope that the Association Agreement would oblige the authorities to reform the state according to European standards. Instead, the authorities headed by President Yanukovich conducted their own rather simple game based on the principle of “who will give more”, while trying to cheat all.

In order to better understand the power dynamic in Ukraine in late 2013, it is worth recalling the joke that was widespread during the presidential elections of 2010, especially in business circles: in essence, the contest between Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yanukovich for presidency was the contest between a dairymaid and a butcher, in which the first was willing to acquire a cow (the country) to milk it for a long time, while the second intended to kill it and sell the meat. Such a collision was beautifully depicted at the end of the 1990s by Mancur Olson<sup>1</sup> comparing the authorities in post-communist countries with stationary and roving bandits.

One of the main problems of modern Ukraine has always been a weak economic policy. Over the last three years, President Yanukovich sequentially refused any attempts to restrain deterioration of the economic situation. The Ukrainian government kept an artificially overstated exchange rate of the national currency, which led to a significant deficit. Ukraine's economy also suffered from the decline of exchange reserves, excessive exchange control, and high interest rates that made both foreign and domestic investment almost impossible. Additionally, Ukraine had almost no access to international financial markets. The general budgeted deficit made up 8% of the GDP, which is predicted to decrease by 1.5% in 2013, while industrial production already decreased by 5.4%.

Most likely, the main goal of the economic policy of the previous regime was to transfer financial resources and companies into the possession of the “Yanukovich family” – a group of young businessmen that quickly bought up private and state companies for next to nothing. They were the only “sanctioned” buyers in the key industries, and the worse the economic situation was, the cheaper these companies were.

If we accept this assertion as the most probable motive for Yanukovich's behavior, his tactics in late 2013 become clear. Indeed, he was not

1 Olson M. (2000) *Power and Prosperity: Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorships*. New York: Basic Books.