

Analysing Euromaidan from the West

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 15 2017

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Following the failure of the Ukrainian government to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union at the Vilnius summit last November, the world witnessed the protests termed the Euromaidan or Revolution of Dignity, to give it its later title. Reminiscent of the Orange Revolution, the crowds soon swelled to hundreds of thousands at their peak. The western media described it as a quest by Ukraine's young people for democracy and a European path. Today, however, young people no longer comprise the majority. As an observer from afar, I found myself watching a live video stream of the confrontation between Berkut riot police and demonstrators in the square on 30 November 2013, and silently cheering when the former failed to break through the barricades. Nonetheless, I find several factors related to more recent Western reporting of the Euromaidan phenomenon disturbing.

The first is the overt and uncritical support for the civic uprising in the Western media and social networks. On Facebook and Twitter, reports from sources such as *Ukrainska Pravda* simply abandoned any pretence of objectivity from the outset. I have received various email and social media requests to sign petitions or in other ways express solidarity with the protesters. In short, many Western reporters and academic analysts have become supporters and advocates rather than critical observers.

A second concern is the intrusion into the protests of extremist elements, as symbolised by the huge portrait of Stepan Bandera outside Kyiv city hall, alongside the slogan 'headquarters of the revolution'. It coincided with a parade on 1 January 2014, the birth date of Bandera, the former leader of the radical branch of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) after 1940, the views of which are a far cry from the sort of principles embraced by Eurocrats in Brussels. The red-black flag of OUN is displayed prominently whenever the demonstrators re-congregate en masse. The Pravyi Sektor (Right Sector) and soccer fan 'ultras' have been responsible for the most violent responses to the Berkut.

Some scholars, and they include friends of mine, maintain that the influence of these extremists is exaggerated and that the majority of the protesters are ordinary folks who sincerely seek an end to corruption and toward Europe. Yet, it is the members of the far right who are maintaining the barricades at night, and who have taken over government buildings. Dmytro Yarosh, who operates from the fifth floor of the seized Trade Union building, is the leader of Pravyi Sektor, and describes his forces as 'soldiers of the national revolution'. He has little or no interest in preserving democracy. His forces have occupied government buildings in at least ten cities of Ukraine. It need hardly be added that no one voted for Yarosh, nor would he likely win a seat in a free election.

The second issue is the goals of the protesters. From the West, it has never been clear exactly what these are, other than a desire to be part of 'Europe', and, latterly, a wish to remove the current government. The swelling of the crowds has coincided precisely with the irrational and clueless responses of the leadership – shootings, kidnappings, etc. In other words, the issues arise instantaneously in response to events or perceived events. We do not see a

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premeditated and clearly thought out programme of action with clear goals from the majority of those who have been in the square.

It is linked to the first question because it raises the issue of the makeup of a replacement regime if it includes substantial representation from political parties like Svoboda, which could not hope to be part of the leadership through the ballot box. Ukraine's more moderate parties and their leaders have never distanced themselves from the radical extremists. The government has already tried to exploit such ambivalence with its (abortive) introduction (16 January) of changes to the Criminal Code, imposing penalties for the public denial of the crimes of fascism. That it failed does not negate the fact that it was presented with the opportunity.

Third, and conversely, it is plain that the Yanukovich regime is corrupt and brutal, and does not hesitate to use occasional force against peaceful protesters. It has demonstrated in recent years that it is willing to subvert law courts, beat enemies, enrich friends, and generally purloin the resources of the country it is supposed to rule. On those grounds, without doubt, the protests make sense and it is time for change.

But should we in the West support the removal of an elected president by force? Isn't this an admission that the current electoral system is unworkable? The most recent 2012 parliamentary elections in Ukraine reflected very closely the results of opinion polls. Most polls also suggest that were there to be a presidential election today, Yanukovich would be leading in the first round, but would lose to most opposition leaders in a second-round run-off. The elections are scheduled to be held early next year. So why not wait and remove him by popular vote? Have those who are frustrated by what they perceive as the lack of positive support from Brussels for the Maidan protests (highlighted by Victoria Nuland's comment 'F...k Europe!') forgotten what happened in Egypt, or Libya, and, perhaps especially, Iraq when unsavoury leaders were removed by force?

Fourth, throughout the protests, opinion polls have been circulated, which suggest that support for and opposition to Euromaidan is distributed fairly evenly (40-50% in favour; and about 40% opposed), Russian intervention and Vladimir Putin notwithstanding, Ukraine itself is bitterly divided, but few in Western media are speaking with those on the other side of the divide. It is facile to suggest that most or all of them are supporters of Regions or Communists. It is even more simplistic to suggest that Donetsk-based Regionnaires would rather be part of the Russian Customs Union – for many of them that would mean the curtailment of a lucrative and freebooting lifestyle based in part on trade with Europe.

Is there such a thing as an average Ukrainian resident and, if such a person exists, could he or she possibly comprehend the prism through which Western analysts observe Ukraine? It would be naïve, I think, to believe that this imaginary figure would necessarily stand firmly behind those at the barricades or the corrupt regime, and one could be fairly sure that he/she would wish to keep a healthy distance from either the Ukrainian oligarchs or the machinations of Moscow. The Bandera portrait would likely induce similar concerns.

Unfortunately, it seems, the era of objective reporting, insofar as it can exist or ever existed, is over. It has been replaced by simplistic evocations of the virtues of Western democracy versus the perils of Russian authoritarianism, illustrated by the evil president (Vladimir Putin) and the bloodied journalist (Tetiana Chornovol) or opposition leader (Yurii Lutsenko). In taking such stances, Western observers insert their own beliefs as the best for the people of Ukraine. Their cause is our cause. But we need to adopt a broader perspective, one that encompasses the views of all residents of Ukraine. Revolutions are complicated affairs, and there is always more gray than black and white.

About the author:

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Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War (2014), Russia in the 20th Century: The Quest for Stability (2011), and Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine (2007).