Right Revolution? Hopes and Perils of the Euromaidan Protests in Ukraine

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Abstract: This paper discusses the hopes of Ukrainians who participated in Euromaidan anti-government protests in November–December 2013, in particular resistance to police violence and demands of better living standards associated with utopian visions of “Europe” and “democracy”. It also discusses some of the challenges currently faced by this movement’s tolerance of rightwing radicals in its midst as the “lesser evil” in the struggle against the regime. It argues that a truly progressive movement must break with the false dichotomy of “Nazis vs. bandits” and address the pressing socio-economic problems and civil rights violations in the country.

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Introduction

When the Lenin statue was torn down by protesters in the Kyiv on 8 December, one of the Ukrainian opposition leaders, Arseniy Yatseniuk, commented humorously at a press-conference that “Lenin fell out of jealousy, for he only managed to create one revolution, while our current president already caused two” (Ukrainska Pravda December 8, 2013). Indeed, to many observers, the “Euromaidan” protests in Ukraine in November–December 2013 were reminiscent of the “Orange revolution” nine years earlier. The same place – Independence square in Kyiv (with smaller protests in the main squares of other cities), the same time – towards the end of the year in freezing cold weather, the same enemy – Viktor Yanukovych, whose legitimacy in ruling the country as the president of Ukraine was challenged in both cases, although for differing reasons. Even the social base of the protests looks similar with university students, the middle class and small entrepreneurs and residents of Western regions of the country dominating in the crowd. It is definitely the biggest protest in scale and duration since Independence, perhaps surpassing the Orange revolution. Furthermore, it is once again focusing on ideological and geo-political issues that seem to divide the country into two roughly equal parts, where the choice is presented as “Europe vs. Russia” or as “forward to the West vs. back to the USSR”.

However, just as these similarities are obvious, so are the underlying differences in these two protests. The Orange revolution was a response to electoral fraud, with one very concrete immediate demand – to cancel the results of the vote and hold a re-run of elections with independent observers, allowing people to express their choice freely. There was one opposition leader – Viktor Yushchenko, whom protesters wanted to see as president. At the same time, the former president Leonid Kuchma was stepping down after ten years of presidency, and while he would have preferred to hand down his rule to Yanukovych, he did not want bloodshed and political turmoil just at the end of his rule and was willing to negotiate with Yushchenko as well.
Today the opposition seems much more fragmented and unable to formulate concrete immediate demands that would be shared by all. Moreover, Euromaidan started as a civic initiative, quite distrustful of organised oppositional parties and their leaders. Whilst during the Orange revolution, protesters were clearly supportive of the opposition leader and the main slogan was “Yushchenko – TAK” (“Yushchenko – YES”), today slogans vary from the pro-EU “Ukraine is Europe” to the nationalist “Glory to Ukraine”. At the same time, the ruling president is in the middle of his first term, and does not want to step down and his rule is now much more centralised and consolidated. Following government orders, police responded to the pro-EU protests with a confrontational mood bringing about a new, much more numerous, wave of protest. Self-defence groups were formed to defend the square at night, barricades built and constantly fortified, and women, children and the elderly discouraged from participating in the more tense moments.

While there has not yet been scholarly analysis of the Euromaidan protests, these similarities and differences are currently well documented and discussed both in Ukrainian and Western media. There is, however, a second set of similarities and differences that commentators pay less attention to. The destruction of the Lenin monument – an opening scene to this paper can serve us as a guiding event in identifying them.

### The Unfinished “Transition from Communism to Democracy”

Looking beyond the first immediate set of commonalities outlined in the introduction, one may notice a similarity with the much more distant events of 1989–1991. Scenes of Lenin monuments torn down by cheering crowds were most common during the anti-Soviet protests of the late eighties and early nineties, and described as part of a “transition from communism to democracy”. While such a definition is inaccurate from the scholarly point of view, as communism represents a political ideology, and democracy – a ruling regime (therefore it is like speaking about a transition from “green” to “apples”), it nevertheless quite adequately represents the political climate and aspirations of those days, which in many ways remains relevant for many protesters of Euromaidan.

In the “communism vs. democracy” framework positions put forwards are in fact less about well-articulated political preferences than about utopian and anti-utopian constructs. Incorporating the “El pueblo unido jamas sara vencido” slogan or the “Bella ciao” chant are not seen as indicating sympathy for communist ideas, and neither are demands to nationalise key industries or to guarantee freedom and equality to all citizens. “Communism” for many protesters is the burden of a grim authoritarian past that somehow still weighs over them, and that they believe can be alleviated by the destruction of a monument that symbolically represents this past. Ukrainians are not alone in creating such an image. In recent pro-EU protests in Bulgaria last summer, protesters presented the current political and economic elites as “communist”, for most of them belonged to the old Communist party nomenklatura that took advantage of the “transition” for their own private gain. Right-wing populist movements throughout Central and Eastern Europe use this reference to “communist” corrupt oligarchs (sometimes also of a different nationality – mostly Russian or Jewish) to present themselves as a “democratic” alternative that represents the interests of “the people”.

The meaning of “democracy” for many protesters is just as vague. Beating up leftist, feminist and union activists at Euromaidan is not seen as anti-democratic, and neither are xenophobic speeches from the stage of a pro-EU protest (more on this in the next section). Many of the protesters know little to nothing about the structure of EU institutions, the contents of the EU–Ukraine association agreement that they wanted the president to sign, or the difference between “association” and “membership”. They may not even know the capitals of the “Western democracies” they want to join, or recent political events in these countries, and they may not be able to explain why in the EU itself there are so many anti-EU protests. What “democracy” (strongly associated with “the West” at least since perestroika, and probably all throughout the Cold War) means is simply a better life. “Democracy” and “Europe” form part of a utopian project that guides the hopes and aspirations of ordinary citizens even in routine daily actions, when they are purchasing a “Euro-product”, hoping it will be of superior quality, renovating their flats according to “Euro-standards” or writing a complaint to a local government official accusing him or her of “acting
undemocratically”. The utopian image of Europe for many is reinforced by the anti-utopian image of Russia looming as a warning of the “worse evil” of authoritarism. As sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko comments, Euromaidan became a point, when large masses of people came to a conclusion that relatively small actions could trigger significant change on the way to reaching a utopian ideal, or on the other hand - in an attempt to prevent an approaching catastrophe (associated with Russian neo-colonial aspirations and the Common Economic Space agreement with Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus).

Demands and grievances

Because the “transition from communism to democracy” is deprived of strictly scholarly meaning, widespread discussions in the so-called “transitology” field about the direction of transition and indicators of successful transition are also futile. What seems to be a more productive strategy for a social scientist is to analyse not the process of “transition”, but those moments in most recent history when the opposition of “communism vs. democracy” have once again been highlighted, and what questions underpin this opposition. Asking not “what is communist” but “what do protesters want to get rid of and bury in the past”, not “what is democratic” but “what are their hopes and demands” seems more worthwhile.

According to Ukrainian protest and coercion data monitoring (Ishchenko 2012), during the last three years, the highest number of protests addressed socio-economic issues. However, these protests usually had fewer participants (usually those directly concerned – members of neighbourhood associations, workers’ collectives, etc.) and were less likely to be supported by any other social agents (be it trade unions, NGOs and political parties) than protests, addressing political and ideological issues. The latter were also more likely to receive media coverage and to be exploited on the eve of elections by various political forces.

Nevertheless, despite the interest of the media and political parties in highlighting the political and ideological protests in the country, the biggest protests in the last three years were concerned with socio-economic issues: mass protests to oppose changes in the Tax code that would have hit small entrepreneurs hard, against changes to the Labour code that would have restricted workers’ rights, against educational reform that would have encouraged commercialization of higher education, against cuts in subsidies to Chornobyl liquidators and Afghan war veterans - to name some of the biggest protests at a nationwide level. At city level, protests against privatisation of public space (in particular - illegal construction projects in backyards and park areas) or over environmental issues (like the mass protests in the most polluted Ukrainian city of Mariupol) are most common. Cases of corruption and violence on behalf of city officials and police also lead to significant grievances, as in the small city of Vradiyivka, where angry citizens attacked a police station after a rape of a 29-year old woman by three men, two of whom were policemen.

Among the issues of greatest concern for Ukrainians according to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in 2012 (KIIS 2012) were rising prices for food (58%) and communal housing fees (54%), loss of work (34%) and wage and pension arrears (32%), corruption (27%) and crime (20%). Among issues of lowest priority were cooperation with EU (3%) and NATO (1%), conflicts among religious denominations (2%) and territorial claims from neighbouring countries (3%).

Research on the social portrait of Euromaidan participants conducted by the Democratic initiatives foundation and Kyiv International Institute of Sociology on 7 and 8 December among randomly selected 1037 participants (Bekeshkina and Khmelko 2013), revealed that 92% of them did not belong to any political parties or NGOs. Only 5% came to the protest following the call of opposition leaders, while the three most common reasons for coming out on the streets were police repressions and in particular – the beating up protesters on the night of 30 November (70% of respondents), the president’s refusal to sign the Ukraine–EU association agreement (53.5%) and a desire to change life in Ukraine (50%).

This data reveals a gap between people’s concerns, mostly related to socio-economic questions and their
civic rights and entitlements. On the contrary, political leaders lack interest in addressing these grievances, focusing instead on issues less relevant for the population, which concern mainly the ideological and geopolitical sphere and are highly divisive, contributing to the image of “two Ukraines”. While popular trust in political leaders in Ukraine is extremely low (in the last position on trust in the parliament, judiciary system and courts among 26 European countries, which participate in the European social survey), divisive ideological and geopolitical issues allow the formulation of a false dichotomy where voting for “our own bastards” may be seen as preferable to voting for “their bastards”.

Resisting the “nazi vs. bandit” dichotomy

One of such false dichotomies that allow both the ruling party and opposition leaders to avoid pressing socio-economic problems and issues of human rights abuse, is that of “Nazis vs. bandits”. As Viacheslav Likhachov (2013) observes, with such a dichotomy, Euromaidan protesters who are fed up with the “bandits” ruling the country tolerate even extreme rightwing groups in their midst, as long as they too are against the ruling political elites. On the other hand, the ruling elites make every effort to present Euromaidan protesters as “Nazis” whose nationalist radicalism is splitting the country, and to lead all those concerned with the “brown plague” to support “bandits” as the lesser evil.

This dichotomy was also imposed by the ruling political elite during the Orange revolution, and in fact some of its roots stem from the Soviet past, where national-democratic dissidents who were concerned with Ukrainian language and culture were labelled as anti-Soviet bourgeois nationalist elements, and state repression was legitimised as if in the interest of preventing the spread of rightwing radicalism. However, one significant difference as compared to the Soviet times and Orange revolution is that today rightwing radicals have indeed become an independent political agent, and not just a scarecrow constructed by political opponents.

When Viktor Yushchenko was running for presidency in 2004, he expelled Oleh Tyahnybok from his party for a xenophobic and anti-semitic speech. During the Orange revolution, Yushchenko was focusing on the idea of a political nation, stressing that it is not important what language one speaks, what church one attends and what ethnicity one is. The field of possible political identities was thus limited to moderate nationalists on one extreme (as long as they do not make xenophobic statements), and liberal or apolitical protesters from all regions on the other (as long as they are against the regime). But during 2012 elections, Tyahnybok’s social-nationalist party “Svoboda” received 12.3% of the vote, and today, during the Euromaidan protests, “Svoboda” ended up in the centre of possible political identities (Papash 2013), with the rightwing limit expanding to radical groups like “Tryzub of Stepan Bandera” and “Patriot Ukrainy”, and the other side shrinking to the pro-EU liberal intellectuals and university students.

Radical-right groups turned out to be the most disciplined and organised in confrontation with the police, and are now a visible presence on the square (Likhachov 2013; Storm 2013). Opposition leader Vitaliy Klychko who presents the “liberal” wing of the opposition, admitted that nationalists are “not his heroes”, that the statue of Lenin was not bothering him personally and his party knew nothing of the attempts to dismantle it (the “Svoboda” party took the responsibility for this act). Nevertheless, he also said that he is cooperating with the nationalists from “Svoboda” because of a common aim to defeat the current political regime (Ukrainska Pravda December 11, 2014).

Leftist activists who came to Euromaidan with social slogans for free education, healthcare and independent trade unions as “European values”, where declared as “provoking” Euromaidan participants both directly from the stage and from Euromaidan security, and by journalists. They were accused of “breaking up the unity of the protest” and coming with slogans that were “too serious” and likely to be misunderstood by the crowd. A self-made red flag with twelve golden stars (imitating the EU flag but on a red rather than blue background) was perceived by security as “communist propaganda”. Security however was unable to respond when activists asked why then was the square full of the black and red flags of the Ukrainian Resistance Army which played a controversial role during World War II and is also likely to “break the unity of the protest” because not all participants share nationalist values.
This attack on leftist activists was not the only example of the tolerant attitude of Euromaidan to rightwing extremism, and willingness to act violently against all who were accused of “communism”, even their own allies. Xenophobic and anti-Semitic poems were recited from the stage, feminist protesters were attacked by youth in balaclavas who tore their posters in favour of gender equality and sprayed tear gas, a speaker from the Euromaidan stage encouraged all the men on the square to join in fighting the “leftist agents provocateurs” from the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine – long-term supporters of the opposition (Kravchuk 2013).

Rightwing radicals from “Tryzub of Stepan Bandera” and “Patriot Ukrainy” actively participated at the orchestrated havoc near Presidents’ office on Bankova Street, discussing in social forums most efficient ways of attacking riot police and condemning the opposition for not being “radical enough”. But while these rightwing radicals on Bankova Street were labelled by the opposition as “agents provocateurs”, the very same people trying to dismantle the statue of Lenin were called “heroes” and “patriots”. Slogans, introduced by rightwing radicals, such as “Ukraine above all” (echoing the Nazi slogan of “Deutschland ueber alles”), “Glory to the nation – death to its enemies”, “Commies on the gallow”, were also tolerated. Even when liberal journalists condemned the violence of rightwing radicals on Euromaidan and pointed to the numerous YouTube videos calling to ethnic hatred and violence towards political opponents (Botanova 2013; Papash 2013), there was no official statement from the Euromaidan organising committee or opposition leaders condemning rightwing radicals and asking them to leave the protest. But, as Likhachov (2013) concludes, these neo-Nazi groups should not be considered even “tactical partners” in the struggle against the regime, for they share the same values and both reinforce the false dichotomy of “Nazis vs. bandits”.

**Conclusion**

The conclusion to this reflection consists of an optimistic and pessimistic component. The optimistic component shows the people’s awareness of their needs and aspirations of a higher living standard and rule of law, and their willingness to mobilise in defence of these socio-economic and civic rights, even without or in spite of politicians’ interest in such protests. Although this awareness is still too vague in political terms and is rather a utopian ideal of “Europe” and “democracy”, it shows that collective action in Ukraine is possible even among citizens who perceive themselves as “apolitical” and do not belong to any parties or civic associations.

The pessimistic component of the conclusion shows that there is an increasing tendency to frame these collective aspirations and grievances in nationalist and conservative terms (which is also the case in many other European countries). The radical nationalist party “Svoboda” led by Oleh Tyahnybok just in nine years moved from the margins (excluded from the “democratic protests” of the Orange revolution) to the very centre of the protests at Euromaidan. This tendency may be due to the widespread poverty and dispossession of ordinary Ukrainian citizens, to deteriorating educational standards, to the demonization of leftist projects as “Soviet” or to the increasing police violence which encourages popular violence in response (Euromaidan was not only the biggest protest of recent years, but also the most visible case of police repression). Identifying the causes of this rightwing turn is a theme for a separate paper. What is already certain is that any future political project that aims at a radical breakthrough, must first of all break out of the “Nazi vs. bandit” dichotomy, refuse to choose the lesser evil and focus instead on resolving the pressing socio-economic problems facing Ukraine.

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**References**


**P.S.**

* From Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe. Published online: 03 Feb 2014: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0965156X.2013.877268