

# Support Ukrainians but do not legitimize the far-right and discredited politicians !

mercredi 22 janvier 2014, par [ISCHENKO Volodymyr](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 7 janvier 2014).

Recently a number of internationally recognized scholars and public intellectuals signed a letter [\[1\]](#) in full support of Euromaidan protests, backing 'Ukrainian society' against 'Ukrainian government'. Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Craig Calhoun, Claus Offe, Saskia Sassen, Charles Taylor, Michel Wieviorka, Slavoj Žižek and many others celebrated the 'legal' and 'peaceful' protests embodying, as they claimed, 'the best European values', demanded a 'Marshall-like plan' for Ukraine, and expressed the hope that, if welcomed to EU, Ukrainians would help to build 'a new Europe and a fairer world'.

Unfortunately, the letter shows an unacceptable level of understanding, simplification and misrepresentation of very contradictory Ukrainian protests containing very dangerous trends which will be only legitimized more if unrecognized by such esteemed academics.

There is little doubt that Viktor Yanukovych rule is corrupt. It stands for the interests of the richest few in Ukraine's highly unequal society and is responsible for the brutal suppression of the opposition protest. The majority of protesting Ukrainians coming to the rallies hope for a just, fair and democratic society even if naively connecting this hope to an idealized "Europe."

Yet Euromaidan is not a conflict between Ukrainian government and Ukrainian society as a whole. Just before the start of the protests, Ukrainian society was almost evenly split between the proponents and opponents of the EU association agreement. In early November, EU association and Customs Union with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan each had the support of roughly 40% of Ukrainian citizens, while at the same time many citizens supported both agreements simultaneously and others rejected both of them. Even after the instances of police brutality against the Euromaidan protesters, various polls are showing a 40% to 50% disapproval of the Euromaidan protesters. The support for the Euromaidan is heavily concentrated in the Western and Central Ukrainian regions while Ukrainians living in the East and the South of the country, where heavy industry is concentrated, overwhelmingly disapprove of the protests. They are justifiably worried about the consequences for their jobs and well-being in the increased competition after joining the free trade zone with EU and severing economic links with other former Soviet countries. They reject not democracy but the structural adjustment and austerity measures, coming with the IMF credit, which are not too much different from those bringing recently even more numerous protests on the streets of EU cities. To present the position of just a half of the population as that of the whole Ukrainian society, while silencing the other half's voice, is a misleading and undemocratic exercise of the discursive power legitimized by high academic statuses.

Although Ukrainian riot police actions were undeniably brutal and Ukrainian government is still failing to punish all those responsible for the violent dispersal of the protest camp on November 30, the Euromaidan protests were not entirely peaceful either. Occupying the Kiev City Administration building was not legal and neither was the dismantling of Lenin's monument, an act of vandalism disapproved by the majority of Kiev inhabitants. For several hours on December 1, 2013 protesters were violently storming the unarmed police line near the Presidential administration building, until they themselves were finally attacked by the riot police, resulting in the bloodiest street

confrontation in the whole history of independent Ukraine, with more than 300 people injured. Despite the popular version blaming the violence on some “provocateurs” numerous investigations show that the overwhelming majority of attackers were the far right and neo-Nazi militants from so called ‘Right-wing sector,’ which unites various nationalist groups participating in Euromaidan.

The letter from established academics, who are mainly politically progressive, surprisingly ignores the extent of the far right involvement in the Ukrainian protests. One of the major forces at Euromaidan is the far-right xenophobic party ‘Svoboda’ (‘Freedom’). They are dominant among the volunteering guards of the protest camp and are the vanguard of the most radical street actions such as the occupation of the administrative buildings in the center of Kiev. Before 2004 ‘Svoboda’ was called Social-National Party of Ukraine and used Nazi ‘Wolfsangel’ symbol. The party leader Oleh Tiahnybok is still known for his anti-Semitic speech. Even after its re-branding, Svoboda is establishing cooperation with Neo-Nazi and neofascist European parties such as National Democratic Party of Germany and Forza nuova of Italy. Its rank-and-file militants are frequently involved in street violence and hate crimes against migrants and political opponents.

At Euromaidan, particularly, the far-right attacked a left-wing student group attempting to bring social-economic and gender equality issues to the protest. Several days later the far-right mob beat and seriously injured two trade union activists accusing them of being “communists.” Slogans, previously purview of far-right subculture such as ‘Glory to Ukraine ! Glory to the heroes !’, ‘Glory to the nation ! Death to enemies !’, ‘Ukraine above everything !’ (an adoption of ‘Deutschland über alles’) have now become mainstream among the protestors. On January 1st, ‘Svoboda’ organized a torchlight march to celebrate the birthday of Stepan Bandera – the leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, which for a certain period collaborated with Nazis, participated in the Holocaust and was responsible for the genocide of Poles in Western Ukraine. Of course, this part of Euromaidan would eagerly proceed to building a ‘new Europe’ although in case of success it would doubtfully be much fairer than Nazi’s Neuordnung Europas. Silencing this dark side of Euromaidan, presenting it as a model of ‘civic maturity’ and ‘the best of European values’ only legitimizes xenophobes and neofascists and helps them to win hegemony within Ukrainian civil society.

Certainly Euromaidan cannot be reduced to a fascist riot as it is frequently shown by hostile Russian media. The level of civic self-organization in the protest camp is impressive and the mass rallies are bringing hundreds thousands of people not involved in any political parties or even civic organizations hoping to win fundamental change towards European dream. However, the only political representation of the protests are Ukraine’s three main opposition parties : one of them is the far-right ‘Svoboda’, the other two (led by Arseniy Yatseniuk and Vitali Klitchko) are full of people who have already discredited themselves while being in power after the ‘Orange revolution’ and are well-connected to some of Ukrainian oligarchs. They have neither the intention, nor the ability to seek socio-economic reform to the Ukrainian model of oligarchic neoliberal capitalism. If the Euromaidan succeeds, these very parties, and no one else, will come to power. To ignore this fact and to celebrate blindly any alternative to indeed a corrupt and brutal regime is politically irresponsible.

Ukrainian progressive grassroots movements and civic organizations do really need international support in defense of the urgent social-economic rights of impoverished Ukrainian citizens and in building their genuine political representation from below. But pathetic and superficial words about ‘European values’ and naive castle-in-the-air proposals for a ‘Marshall-like plan’ for Ukraine at a time when the EU is willing and not able to help Greece and other Southern European economies in crisis are not helping them in any way. We could expect from the top world intellectuals and academics a critical and nuanced position, raising and examining all these important, although unpleasant, issues, and not silencing them out while only providing more legitimacy for discredited politicians and the Ukrainian far right in their struggle for power.

**Volodymyr Ishchenko**, 7 January 2014

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\* <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/support-ukrainians-but-not-far-right/#comment-5267>

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**Notes**

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/03/support-ukrainians-build-fairer-europe>