

The Radicalization of Ukrainian Politics

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THE REBELLION IN UKRAINE: ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

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Since the mystifying collapse of the Yanukovych regime, following the most puzzling disappearance of all security forces protecting government buildings last Friday, the establishment of a new political order has proceeded with breakneck speed, incorporating elements that were rarely if ever seen in previous cases of regime transformation, at least in the post-Communist world. Thus, a few hours ago, a draft composition of the Cabinet of Ministers was presented to tens of thousands of demonstrators on Maidan in an exercise of popular validation. There are reports that activists are calling into question the nomination of Arsen Avakov as Interior Minister, who has been occupying this position on a provisional basis since Saturday. This exercise in direct democracy, rather unique, if not unprecedented, for a large industrialized country, evokes the intimacy of pre-modern assemblies – its name itself (Narodne viche) has medieval roots -- but its political dynamics are conducive to radicalization. Particularly when the Maidan leaders are armed men who led the insurrection, paid dearly with their lives (as a collective), and are showing no intention of disbanding.

It was Maidan that rejected the short-lived agreement brokered by three European representatives last Friday, when Pravyi sector leader Dmytro Yarosh threatened to storm the Presidential Administration if Yanukovich did not resign (in the end, there was no police left to attack). And tonight, the leader of a “hundred” – the traditional Ukrainian name for a civilian armed grouping – opposed the nomination of Avakov, who happens to be the only minister of the entire cabinet hailing from Eastern Ukraine (Kharkiv). [Avakov remained in the Cabinet —DA] A constant narrative of the Maidan experience has been the lack of trust shown by Maidan activists towards politicians of all stripes, including opposition politicians. Five days into the post-Yanukovich period, Maidan appears to have transformed itself into a popular organ of civic control, pressuring politicians to deliver on their promises to root out corruption and abuse of power, the two pervasive problems that have plagued Ukrainian politics since independence. This is a radical innovation, but one that ultimately clashes with the principles of representative democracy. The representation of Maidan is necessarily self-selected: it is those that are most opposed to the current system that go to Maidan.

The popular outcry over Avakov are indicative of a profound contradiction in Ukrainian insurrectional politics. The plight of regional divisions has been raised time and again throughout the Maidan, although there were growing indications that the Maidan appeal was carrying over to the East: the young Eastern cohort appeared as Europe-oriented in the polls, the revulsion at police brutality was high in the East, and large demonstrations even erupted, as in Kharkiv last Friday. Since then, Eastern Ukrainian elites, after a farcical interlude in the form of a “Congress” in Kharkiv announcing its rejection of the new constitutional order last Saturday, all fell in line to recognize the succession of votes (all with constitutional majorities) taken by the Rada over the weekend. After the Party of Regions repudiated its own leader and announced itself as the new opposition, the only actor not recognizing the new regime in Ukraine is Russia. Remarkably, the Russian position appears to have no supporters among Ukrainian officials in the East or South – with the potential exception of Crimea, although there has been no acts of defiance by Crimean officials thus far. [The Crimea parliament just announced a referendum on what would amount to independence –DA] This swift reorientation of Eastern elites towards the new order – Kharkiv governor Dobkin in 48 hours went from not recognizing the change of regime to announcing its candidacy for

2 The Radicalization of Ukrainian Politics

the May presidential election – had however no impact on the willingness of the Maidan victors to include Easterners in a national unity government. This reinforces the pattern according to which political alternance in Ukraine means that one region (the South-East) gets to rule over the other (the Center-West), or vice versa (except that under Yanukovich, one city – namely Donetsk – and then one “Family”, got to rule over the whole country and it had become abundantly clear that the Party of Regions had no intention of abiding by the rules of alternance).

Post-insurrection, the center of gravity in Ukrainian politics has shifted to the interaction between former opposition parties and radical civic activists, leaving considerations of cross-regional national unity far behind in the list of priorities. The problem is that this breeds the perception of exclusion. Maidan was a civic uprising, embodying a wave of popular anger against state impunity (itself crystallized by police and mercenary violence) and corruption, a popular anger that increasingly resonated in the East, even if Easterners tended not to support the reality of Maidan itself, but in the end the East is excluded. With so many civic figures proposed in the Cabinet tonight, it is hard to imagine that respected public figures, or businessman, not tainted by a close association with the previous regime, could not be found. But it is also hard to imagine that any of them would have been “validated” by Maidan. The instant abolition of the 2012 language law, the one eliminating most incentives for Eastern Ukrainians to use Ukrainian, could be seen as a symbolic act away from national unity. Not that the law did not need to be phased out, but only after debates aiming at producing a balanced law which, unlike the 1989 law, would be short on declarations and high on creating incentives to learn and use Ukrainian in public spaces, while respecting the right of Russian-speakers, within limits, to use Russian in their daily lives. A petition yesterday by Lviv intellectuals, signed among others by Myroslav Marynovych and Taras Vozniak, called on the new authorities “to respect the cultural and linguistic needs of the residents of the east and south, so they will not feel like foreigners in Ukraine.” With Eastern Ukrainian elites rallying to the new order, conditions are ripe for developing an inclusive notion of what it means to be Ukrainian. The exclusionary symbolism of groups such as Pravyi Sector and Svoboda, while a subplot of what was otherwise an unprecedented civic uprising against a President — initially popularly elected, but who had made himself increasingly illegitimate by abusing the institutions of governance

3 The Radicalization of Ukrainian Politics

and eventually committing the irreversible act of using lethal violence against civilians — could have the opposite effect of persuading Eastern Ukrainians that important elements of the new order are hostile to them.

Maidan was ultimately about social justice, the desire to live in a “normal” state in which officials respect rather than abuse the individual. In the imagination of protesters, it is this “normality” that is “European.” The most crushing disappointment of the Orange period under Yushchenko, and with Tymoshenko twice as Prime Minister, was the lack of will expressed by Orange authorities to seriously tackle issues of justice and corruption, and this durable disappointment is a the root of the mistrust, evoked earlier, of Maidan activists towards opposition politicians. (And this social groundswell, incidentally, is a sure predictor that Tymoshenko stands no chance of becoming the next President). The announcement today that two prominent young Maidan activists, Tetyana Chornovol and Yehor Sobolev, will join the government to head, respectively the “Anti-Corruption Bureau” and the “Lustration Committee”, is a bold initiative sending the message that politics will no longer be conducted the post-Soviet way. Potential Western donors, set to get engaged in what could be an mammoth Western package of economic aid, are warning the about-to-be-officialized government that the pervasive culture of corruption (Ukraine ranks extraordinarily low in Transparency International) has to be tackled head-on. Whether the two Maidan radicals, with no administrative experience, will acquire the bureaucratic power to make substantive changes, and how lustration, or the policy of blocking candidates with certain political biographies from working for the state, will be applied in practice, are questions that cannot be answered now. Yet the creation of these new posts, and the reputation of the appointees, shows that the meaning of Maidan far exceeded the demands for a change in government. In the same vein, the request by the Rada that the International Criminal Court in The Hague investigates former President Yanukovich, and perhaps eventually some of his former close associates, for mass killing is important, as it makes it harder to argue that the prosecution of former political opponents is an act of political revenge by the new authorities.

Unless, of course, the ICC is presented as yet another case of Western intervention into Ukrainian affairs. The case against an unseemly “intervention”

4 The Radicalization of Ukrainian Politics

is not only heard in Russia, but also among Western analysts. Political support, in this view, is equated with intervention. But this was a discursive intervention, devoid, wild speculations aside, of concrete economic or security elements. In other words, the Maidan activists were on their own on the ground. When mass violence erupted last Tuesday, the French daily Liberation's headline was "Trahis par l'Europe" ("Betrayed by Europe"). The "intervention" had been hollow. But it finally provoked serious engagement by Europe, in the form of personal sanctions, and then high-pressure mediation, the all-night session that produced an agreement in which Yanukovich lost everything, but his position. The accord, however, was rejected by the radicalized Maidan, meaning that the European "intervention" could not sway the dynamics on the grounds. The real issue, in the end, is Russia, not Europe. Talks of a new Cold War are totally besides the point. Russia cannot intervene, in the more classical sense of the word, because it has no allies in Ukraine (with the very important exception of Crimea). Russia may not recognize the new order, but the Party of Regions – the once almighty Eastern Ukrainian party – does. Russia may reduce the insurrection to the work of extremists, but even officials within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate are appealing to their "Russian brothers" to stop calling Ukrainians "Banderites and fascists", as it is hurtful. Russia seems to have lost its grasp on internal Ukrainian political dynamics. Yet, Maidan or not, Ukraine trades as much with Russia as it does with Europe, and the close cultural, linguistic and memorial linkages, in addition to family links, of a great number of Ukrainians with Russia is a durable sociological fact. At this fundamental geoeconomic and geocultural level, Ukraine cannot escape being part to a certain degree of a Russian economic and cultural sphere. The real question, however, is political. Maidan can be seen as a stunning popular uprising seeking to change the nature of the political system in Ukraine to make it more congruent, in popular imagination, with a vision of how European politics operates. Maidan, even though it was initially framed as an act of foreign policy reorientation, became an act of domestic politics transformation. The challenge is to persuade Russia that the Ukraine's EU aspirations are not directed against Russia, but constitute a political battle among Ukrainians. Persuasion comes with inclusion, and international mediation over political or economic matters in Ukraine without the inclusion of Russia are bound to fail. [The events in Crimea today make this challenge considerably harder –DA]

5 The Radicalization of Ukrainian Politics