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Ukraine: “Popular Uprising for Democracy’’ or “Fascist Putsch”

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Let’s begin with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s version. One can think what one likes about deposed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, but his election in 2012 was recognized as legitimate by international observers and, after a certain hesitation, by the defeated candidate, Yulia Timoshenko. In fact, relatively honest elections were just about the only positive outcome for ordinary people of the last big mobilization on Maidan Square, the ‘Orange Revolution’ of December 2004.

Presidential elections were set for March 2015, and moved up to December 2014 by the abortive agreement signed on Februrary 21, signed by Yanukovich and the parliamentary opposition. Polls predicted defeat for Yanukovich. And despite the corruption that characterized his regime, it tolerated a good measure of political freedom. Among other things, much of the mass media was in the camp of the opposition.

As for the immediate issue, the Agreement of Association with the European Union, polls showed that the population was divided. From that point of view, it is the attempt to impose the Agreement “from the street” that appears as undemocratic. A democratic demand would have been for a free public discussion, followed by a referendum.

The Provisional Government

As for the provisional government that is now in power, although it was ratified by Parliament, this was in fact done in violation of the constitution, which requires a 75 per cent vote to impeach a president. No such vote was held. Moreover, at the present moment Olexander Turchinov is combining the post of Speaker of Parliament with that of President of Ukraine, a concentration of vast power that goes well beyond anything allowed for in the constitution. This does not augur well for the fairness of the coming presidential elections.

That said, it is clear that the tens, and at times hundreds, of thousands who filled Maidan Square were moved by the desire to end the pervasive corruption of the political system (and that penetrates most non-state institutions). The protesters want to establish popular control of the government and to orient its policy in the interests of the people.

That movement is characteristic of the present period which has seen a series of similar popular uprisings – in the Arab countries, but also in the former Soviet territory – (Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kirgizstan 2005). An atomized population is fed up with the political regime. It mobilizes through the social media, but without a clear programme. The fruits of the mass mobilization are then reaped by forces that are organized and that have a

clear programme.

The underlying condition of this phenomenon in Ukraine is the absence of an influential left, which, in its turn, reflect the current weakness of the working-class, the traditional base of the left. Workers, as workers, were absent from Maidan (no strike in support of the demonstrations took place), even though most of the protesters were no doubt employees earning very modest salaries.

For the real problem was not Yanukovich, although his regime was indeed corrupt and serving interests hostile to the working-class. (As for the bloodletting on Maidan, its real authors are still clouded in mystery. Some observers, most notably the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Estonia (hostile to Russia), have suggested that it was organized by the Opposition itself.) In that, Yanukovich's regime was really no different from those of his predecessors, including Viktor Yushchenko, hero of the "Orange Revolution," and before him Leonid Kuchma, who wanted to bring Ukraine into NATO, and before him, Leonid Kravchuk, the Communist bureaucrat who spent most of his life fighting Ukrainian nationalism only to become suddenly the father of independent Ukraine.

The real problem is political and economic systems dominated by 'oligarchs,' who manipulate linguistic and cultural divisions to advance their own interests. And from that point of view, the recent events have changed nothing. Anyone familiar with Ukrainian politics knows that there is a constant circulation of political personalities between government and opposition: the oppositionists of Maidan were yesterday members or allies of the group in power. That, by the way, distinguishes the Ukrainian regime from the Russian. The latter is 'bonapartist' in the sense that the executive dominates the oligarchs, even while promoting their overall economic interests. In Ukraine the oligarchs dominate the government.

The mobilized but atomized masses seemed incapable of understanding the real source of the problem and even less of putting forth a real solution (which would be the socialization of the main levers of the economy). Most saw membership in the European Union – which, of course, was not being offered – a magical solution to corruption and a guarantee of respect for democratic norms.

The lack of a clear analysis and programme explains the role that fascist forces were able to play in the events. These forces rejected any compromise with the contested government, presenting themselves as unyielding adversaries, not only of the current leaders, but of the 'system' itself. And they call for a 'national revolution.' This intransigent position attracted demonstrators who were aware of the bitter fruits of the Orange Revolution and who did not understand the real meaning of the proposed 'national revolution.'

Fascists Gain Legitimacy

This brings us to the other interpretation: the 'fascist putsch.' Even if it does not translate the complexity of the events, it has some grounding in reality. One of the three oppositional parties with whom the European diplomats negotiated the agreement of February 21 was Oleg Tyaginbok, who lead the extreme right-wing Svoboda (Freedom), an anti-Russian, anti-semitic party that wants Ukraine for ethnic Ukrainians who speak Ukrainian (which would thus exclude a little less than half of the population). Svoboda obtained 12 per cent of the vote in the 2012 parliamentary elections, mainly, but not exclusively, in the three western provinces, the main centres of militant nationalism.

Until 2005, when Svoboda underwent a certain makeover, the party bore the name 'National-Social' and had as its symbol the 'wolfsangel,' emblem of certain Nazi SS units. At various moments during the demonstrations, one could see the red-black banner of OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) on the stage at Maidan. OUN collaborated with the German occupation in World War II and participated in the mass murder of Poles and Jews. Tyaginbok himself was expelled from the rightwing parliamentary bloc in 2004 for remarks about the "Jewish-Russian mafia" that was controlling Ukraine. Citing the party's racist and xenophobic character, in 2012 the European Parliament appealed to the democratic parties of Ukraine not to associate or form alliances with Svoboda.

Despite that, diplomats from the EU and U.S. saw fit to confer legitimacy on this party, which is now integrated into the official structures of the state. Its members now hold several ministerial portfolios, including that of Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Defence, and Prosecutor General (who is responsible for upholding the constitution and other laws).

But Svoboda has competition on its right from a much smaller but more violent group: the Right Sector, which is composed of fascist and football thugs and led by Dmytro Yarosh, a long-time fascist activist. In the latter days of Maidan, Right Sector activists, who were armed, contributed to forcing the pace of the situation by taking over public buildings during the negotiations between Yanukovich and the parliamentary opposition. They thus contributed to blocking application of the agreement of February 21, which was negotiated with the aid of European emissaries, and would have created a provisional government of national coalition.

At present, members of the Right Sector hold posts in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, responsible for the police and the internal armed forces. According to some reports, Yarosh has become assistant Secretary of the Council for National Security and Defence, an organism that advices the President on national-defence strategy. The Secretary of that Council is Andriy Parubiy, a longtime far-right activist. Recently, Prime Minister Arseniy Yarsenuk dismissed three Assistant Ministers of Defence for their refusal to integrate the Right Sector's armed bands into Ukraine's regular armed forces.

Thus, for the first time since World War II, neo-fascists hold posts in the national government of a European state. And they do this with the blessing of the Western democracies.

Right Sector forces have seized government arsenals in the western regions and are the source of a wave of violence and vandalism that has swept Ukraine, directed at pro-Russian or left-wing organizations, personalities, and symbols. Among other, the headquarters of the Communist Party and the offices of an anti-fascist organization in Kiev were ransacked. There were failed attempts to burn down the Kiev home of the head of the Communist Party and a synagogue in Zaproizhe. In some towns in the west of Ukraine (for example, Rovno) Right Sektor thugs appear to be in control of the local government.

In sum, although one cannot speak of a 'fascist putsch,' fascists forces have emerged from the events with increased strengthen and legitimacy.

Complex Divisions

It goes without saying that this does not augur well for a country that is so deeply divided,

for a very fragile state that had never existed until 1991 (except for some months during the Russian civil war). The western provinces were attached to Soviet Ukraine only in 1939 (and reattached in 1944). As for Crimea, which had been part of Russia since the eighteenth century, Moscow presented it as a gift to Ukraine in 1954. If the nationalists reject the Soviet past as illegitimate – and they are calling for lustration – they should logically be prepared to give up Crimea. Instead, Svoboda's programme calls for the abolition of Crimea's autonomy. The party also wants to reintroduce ethnicity in identity documents. (A prominent member of Svoboda even proposed to make the use of Russian a criminal offense.)

A situation so fragile would seem to counsel prudence to genuine patriots of Ukraine. But the nationalists, who are a minority in the country, want to impose their will on the others by force. One of the first acts of Parliament after Yanukovich took flight was to rescind the law that allowed certain regions to make Russian a second official language, though subordinate to Ukrainian. This decision was soon annulled by the government, but the damage was done. Polls indicate that a strong majority believes that Russian should be recognized as a second official language. Somewhat less than half the population uses it as their everyday language. Parliament's actions help to understand the reaction to the new government in Crimea, largely Russian-speaking and ethnically Russian.

The government that was formed in the wake of Maidan is thus anything but a government of national unity, as envisioned by February 21 Accord, which was aimed at reassuring the Russian-speaking population of the eastern and southern regions. Of the 19 ministers in the new government, only two come from the east, none from the south. Besides the language question, it has introduced a resolution to outlaw the Communist Party, which took 13 per cent of the vote in 2012 and is, in fact, the only remaining oppositional party after the Party of Regions fell apart. In several western provinces, where the legislatures are operating independently of Kiev, the Communist Party and the Party of Regions have been declared illegal.

Ukraine's divisions are very deep and complex. Besides language, there is culture, in particular historical memory. The heroes of the western provinces collaborated with the German occupation and participated in its crimes; the heroes of the east and south fought fascism and for the Soviet Union. There are also economic interests: the eastern part of the country, the most industrial, is closely integrated with Russia, by far Ukraine's biggest trading partner. There are also more subtle cultural differences, which are beyond the scope of this article. But one thing is clear – the population of the western provinces, driven by anti-Russian nationalism, is more easily mobilized. A significant part of the protesters on Maidan came from those provinces.

The American and EU Interventions

A few words in conclusion on the international actors. Many will recall the conversation between Victoria Nuland, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and the U.S. Ambassador in Kiev, Geoffrey Pyatt. The media focused on her saying "fuck the EU." Much less prominence was given to that part of the conversation that should have really shocked: a discussion of the composition of the government that would follow Yanukovich's ouster. Nuland definitely wanted to have "Yats" as head of the government. And, behold, Arseniy Yatsenyuk is today Ukraine's Prime Minister. Surely, a mere coincidence.

One could also see Nuland during the demonstrations distributing bread to the protesters in Maidan Square. Imagine the reaction of the Canadian government to the Russian

ambassador distributing donuts to student protesters during Quebec's 'Maple Spring.' There is a difference, to be sure (as the West and the media claim without irony): when Western diplomats intervene in the internal affairs of foreign countries they do so to promote democracy and defend the people of those countries…

Given the deep internal divisions of Ukraine, its history, its geography, its economy, it seems obvious that the most suitable international stance would be one of neutrality, like that of Finland or Sweden. Polls indicate that 80 per cent of the population opposes membership in NATO. Yet all presidents up until Yanukovich pursued membership in NATO. Yanukovich was the first to embrace a policy of neutrality. But NATO will not hear of that.

We do not know why Yanukovich suddenly suspended negotiations on the Association Accord. He did not reject it outright. If he did it under pressure from Moscow, it is not clear why Putin waited so long to apply it, since, had he done it earlier, he could have avoided the mass protest. After all, Yanukovich's party adopted the goal of an accord back in 2008. It seems probable that Yanukovich himself changed his mind, fearing the negative impact on Ukraine's economy (which is in very bad shape, as it has been more or less since independence in 1991). The EU was offering a mere 600 million euros to be paid in tranches dependent on 'structural reforms,' that is, on a policy of austerity applied to a population among which poverty is already very widespread. Moreover, Ukraine would have to remove all commercial barriers and duties for goods and services coming from Europe and to align its legislation and regulations with those of Europe. That would have had devastating consequences for Ukraine's industry, located mainly in the east. And what in return? Neither free entry into Europe for its citizens nor membership in the European Union. Yanukovich seems to have taken fright. But not 'Yats,' who has promised Ukrainians 'painful measures.'

Remember Yugoslavia. It was after IMF-imposed reforms that the separatist movements really took off. An austerity policy would be devastating for the Ukrainian population and reinforce unhealthy and centrifugal tendencies.

The Russian View

How do things appear from the Russian side? The Russian government no doubt sees what has happened as another step in the longstanding policy of the U.S. and NATO to contain Russia's influence to her own borders, this despite the solemn commitment of George Bush made to Gorbachev not to expand NATO in return for German reunification. From the Russian point of view, it is another use of the tactic of manipulation of popular mobilizations, used successfully in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine, to bring about regime change.

Besides that, for purely domestic reasons, Putin cannot remain indifferent to the rise of an extreme anti-Russian right in a region with which Russia has close cultural and historic ties. The foreign policy of his authoritarian, corrupt and largely incompetent regime is about the only thing that attracts positive support from the population.

It isn't surprising, then, that Russia has frozen its offer of $15-billion in loans to Ukraine, an offer made, be it noted, without austerity conditions. The government has also announced it will not renew its discount on the price of gas. And Russia has many other economic levers at its disposal. Russia is Ukraine's leading trading partner and already threatened to impose punitive tariffs on certain goods when the European accord was being discussed.

Russia's military moves in Crimea appear to be pursuing primarily symbolic goals aimed at

its own population as well as at Kiev's right-wing government, which is being warned not to get carried away. As for Western indignation, one should recall the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, a flagrant violation of international law (such as it is), under the invented pretext of a threatened genocide of the Kosovars. Or the illegal invasion of Iraq justified by imaginary weapons of mass destruction. And dozens of other illegal interventions in Latin America and the world over.

The words of the last U.S. ambassador to the USSR can provide a fitting conclusion: "Because of its history, geographical location, and both natural and constructed economic ties, there is no way Ukraine will ever be a prosperous, healthy, or united country unless it has a friendly (or, at the very least, non-antagonistic) relationship with Russia." Contrary to the will of the majority Ukrainians, NATO rejects that position out of hand. •

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