

Protests in Ukraine.

How did it all come about and where will it end?

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Until today, President Viktor Yanukovich hasn't made one single concession to the opposition or to the protesters at the EuroMaidan. Their demands were very simple. They want Ukraine to move in another direction: away from random police violence, lawlessness, bribing, corruption and state theft. In fact, Ukraine is a banana republic, a country where mobsters are in command. It is not much different from your average third world country and rather similar to the Russian Federation.

1. A steady degradation of life in society

With the right friends you are a god. No one will touch you. You will get away with everything, even if you commit horrific crimes. Generally speaking, people know when to shut up and if they don't, a certain amount of persuasion will be applied, e.g. by law enforcers, tax collectors or judges. In reality, we have here a kind of Soviet system of a "state against the people" which is allowing a clique of people to enrich themselves to the extreme.

It all started in the 1990s, but the situation degraded further after Yanukovich became president. From 2010 and onwards Yanukovich further increased his (abuse of) power. One can easily find studies which clearly outline this process and the accompanying gangster methods, e.g. the well-documented Winfried Schneider-Deters, *Die Ukraine: Machtvakuum zwischen Russland und der Europäischen Union*, 2012.

Abuse of power meant greater wealth for the president himself, for his son Alexander who saw his fortune grow with literally thousands of percents and for his ally oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, whose fortune tripled to 15 billion dollar – that is according to *forbes.com* and *forbes.ua*.

By the way, this "legal theft" has been greatly facilitated by a multitude of enterprises throughout the European Union, including the Netherlands, specialising in off-shoring. There, millions if not billions of Euros have been located in shell companies.

Oddly enough, the powers that be are colonising their own country from abroad. The country should not belong to the EU, but their wives and children live there, they go to school and study, they do their shopping there, they build houses and buy real estate, conduct business and put there their money in a EU bank.

There are serious grieves among the Ukrainians and they are visible and palpable for every one, even for irregular visitors to the country. After the Orange Revolution there were great expectations – it became a bitter disappointment, while the last three or four years, the burden of daily life grew ever more unbearable. Nowadays, a medical doctor, for example, may earn no more than 125 Euro per month.

2. Two recent and well-publicised examples

But there have been some highly publicised incidents which caused national outrage. To my opinion, the emotions

surrounding these incidents became manifest again, when President Yanukovich failed to sign the EU association treaty. I will shortly describe these events to highlight the level of lawlessness in Ukraine.

(1) Two years ago three men raped the 18-year-old Oksana Makar. Makar, a citizen of Mikolayiv, was then beaten and strangled and left for dead, wrapped in a carpet, taken outside and set alight. The men went back home for more drinks.

The next morning, a passerby found Oksana alive and conscious in the smouldering carpet with 55 percent of her body severely burned. Oksana Makar died after two or three weeks of daily surgery.

One man – an orphan with no friends to back him – was taken into custody. Meanwhile the other two – well connected to the powers that be – went home on bail and that could have been the end of the story for them. However, state authorities were unable to contain the nationwide indignation. The men were arrested again and tried. Not to serve the cause of justice, but as a form of damage control.

(2) Something similar happened last summer in Vradiyivka, in the province of Mikolayiv as well. A mother of one, 29-year-old Iryna Krashkova was violently raped by two local police officers and their driver. What happened to Krashkova, who now has a titanium plate in her skull because of her injuries, led to a “mini-Maidan”.

Because what followed was first of all a deliberate attempt of the regional authorities to protect the main culprit, a police captain with a very bad reputation. When local protesters came out to protest at the police station things got somewhat awkward. The infamous Berkut riot police (now working overtime in Kyiv) came out to Vradiyivka to batter the protesters into obedience.

Meanwhile the Ministry of the Interior had published on its website a message that the protesters were drunkards – as if it was the Soviet Union all over again, when communist propaganda would label dissidents as anti-social. Protests erupted in Zhitomir, Kirovograd, Poltava, Ternopil and Chernihiv. On 18 July 2013 protesters set up tents on Independence Square / EuroMaidan which were removed during the night. Organiser Vasili Lyubarts went to prison for 10 days and other protesters were fined. However, finally, justice was served, reluctantly.

3. Mentality: anti-Semitism and nationalism

A lot is being said now about the differences between Eastern and Western Ukraine. Indeed Western Ukraine is less submissive than the Eastern parts. National and regional pride became much more developed there and more importantly this region suffered less from Soviet oppression (1944-1991) than Eastern Ukraine (1920-1991). They have been battered less and during the dark days of communism clung to their national pride.

What is happening now is more of a battle between assertive Ukrainians from Western and Central Ukraine and an all-Ukrainian generation of students and young adults, who long for a life of dignity. This, however, does not mean that Ukraine is a typical European country. Ukrainians are often shocked by relativistic ethics in the West and critical of what they would call a *laissez-faire* democracy, but they genuinely want to establish the rule of law, have a better quality of life and a better future for all.

However, the image that spin doctors in the Russian Federation and Ukraine want to create of Western Ukraine and of the protesters is shallow and false.

The nationalism of the Ukrainians of the western regions is rather an all-inclusive one and more directed against a certain appreciation of the Soviet past, which, in turn, in Eastern Ukraine, is considered – especially by the older generations – as heroic, anti-fascist and anti-nationalistic. (Not taken into account the fact that Soviet cosmopolitanism was rather a generous gesture of the Kremlin to allow subdued peoples to participate in its own Russian-styled national-communist ideology and cultural sphere.) Hence, the spin of President Yanukovich and his Russian counterpart – see below – about Western Ukrainian nationalism, collaboration with the Germans and anti-Semitism.

Looking at stereotyping and popular sentiments, one has to admit, it can be found everywhere in Ukraine (as in Western Europe) and maybe even more in the Russian parts of Ukraine and in Russia itself.

Therefore, it is important to emphasize that on 20 January 2014 the Ukrainian Federation of Jewish Organisa-

tions (VAAD) has spoken out against the abuse of anti-Semitism for political purposes. The statement was signed by the president of VAAD Josef Zissels. Zissels explicitly referred to the Ukrainian powers that be, which fooled around with this issue before, e.g. in 2012 or 2013 when Jewish organisations refused to discuss the theme with Yanukovych.

Anti-Semitism does exist, even in Church, but it is not accepted. For example, there exist good relations between the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and Jewish organizations and Jewish leaders. This was demonstrated last December 2013 with the joint condemnation of a sermon by the Greek Catholic priest Mikhailo Arsenich by the Orthodox Chief Rabbi Yakov Dov Bleich and the highest Greek Catholic Church leader Svyatoslav Shevchoek. Arsenich was sanctioned for his from October 2010 sermon as well and had to publicly ask for forgiveness.

For reasons not obvious to me, this more than three year old incident was dug up last December 2013, first it made waves in Ukraine and now in Russia. Even President Vladimir Putin, visiting Brussels on 28 January 2014 for the annual EU-Russia summit, referred to Arsenich. To him it was clear proof of the fascist and anti-Semitic mentality of the protesters @ EuroMaidan.

There exists an unsophisticated Ukrainian nationalism, it can't be denied. But it is a fringe phenomenon. I remember that a Jewish contact of mine in Lviv and whom I met on three separate occasions over the last 10 or so years regarded these groups as a big joke.

4. Pride

Personally, I take great pride in knowing some of the protestors who were or still are at the EuroMaidan. After all, they run many risks, e.g.:

- an abrupt end of their studies
- the end of their career
- job loss
- banishment of their organisation
- punishment of family members
- collective punishment of the village or region where they live
- a (prison) sentence (even for crimes they did not commit)
- maximum penalties for offenses minimal
- some (heavy) abuse (physical and mental)
- torture
- to go missing
- and death

5. Churches

Whereas the Churches are concerned, please consult the Communicantes website and Facebook pages.

6. Future

The future is very uncertain. Look at to what length the Russian Federation under then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin went in Chechnya, just to keep his empire intact. And although the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian populace and the ruling classes boast of their conservative values, it is plain to see that this tree of healthy virtues often bears disfigured fruits. They smell of a breathtaking disrespect for fundamental rights and basic human values. If Russia does not get civilised, Ukraine will remain a locus of tensions.

Right now, people are extremely fearful that Yanukovych will remain in power and that he will have his revenge. Whereas the European Union is concerned, people are extremely disappointed. They think that the EU is merely waiting for the outcome of the present conflict and will adjust its policies accordingly. Sanctions should have been imposed a month ago, people say. Now they rather prefer the EU to shut up instead of offering false hopes.