

Ukraine: The springtime of the peoples arrives in Europe

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The Arab Spring arrived in winter 2010, close to Europe; in the countries located on the other side of the Mediterranean. Four years later, we see that the springtime of the peoples is not solely an Arab phenomenon. Now in winter it has also erupted in Europe, although for now in the external periphery of the European Union. We probably did not recognise to what point the process of capitalist integration in Europe contributed to the explosive accumulation of tensions in its near but extra-European periphery. This is still truer now in its nearer European periphery. The link this time was direct, clearly visible: initially, the conflict broke out in Ukraine around the question of adhesion to the EU. This was the first slogan which began to gather the crowds, which gave birth to a mass social movement and which led to huge upheavals including the threat of war. Not a civil war as in Libya or Syria – although that was expected and incited in Russia and in all the propaganda networks linked to it around the world – but an international war.

A springtime of the peoples is always surprising. It happens in a country in a totally unexpected manner, like a clap of thunder in a serene sky. However, after the event it proves that there is nothing surprising about why it has happened there and not elsewhere. The same is true now. On the world political map, Ukraine is a gigantic historic anomaly, a deviation in relation to a certain very significant “typical value”, at least at the European scale. The biggest country in Europe in terms of area, after Russia, and one of the biggest in terms of population, it has been an independent state for barely 23 years. This on a continent where for a long time the “typical value” corresponds to national states for all the big nations, even those much smaller than the Ukrainian nation. The historical anomalies have the following specificity: the most diverse contradictions accumulate, explode and combine around them and thus they are transformed into powder kegs much more easily than elsewhere.

The weight of long term oppression

Ukraine bears an extraordinary burden of several centuries of national oppression, mainly Polish and Russian [1]. In Soviet Ukraine, after several years of intense positive discrimination known as Ukrainisation, a return to the policy of Russification came with the advent of the Stalinist regime, behind which Russian imperialism was hidden. The intelligentsia was massacred and several million peasants, that is to say the basis of national identity, were exterminated by famine. After the Second World War, Russification affected all the Ukrainian lands, now reunited; although in western Ukraine, previously under the Polish colonial yoke, a vigorous anti-Soviet resistance of Ukrainian nationalists was maintained until the mid 1950s. Outside the period of the government of Petro

Shelest (1963-1972), Russification was pursued virtually until the fall of the USSR. On the eve of the proclamation of independence by Ukraine, I wrote in the review "Nouvelle Europe", published in the European Parliament: "what makes the Ukrainian process vulnerable is the fact that as a nation without a state, subject to a long term oppression, it has not yet completed its national formation" [2]. And this is still the case. Barely two decades of existence as a state is too short a time to overcome the legacy this oppression has left behind it inside Ukrainian society.

Hence the great disparities in the uprising of the masses – the second now, after the "Orange Revolution" – according to the different regions of the country. Directed against a regime whose main rearguard was in the east of the country, it has spread in the regions of the west and centre, the cradles of the pro-independence movements after the First World War. Hence also a paradoxical contradiction between this national movement, very delayed historically, but aspiring to consolidate an independent state, and its desire to join the EU, which – being the instrument of capitalist globalisation – weakens national states and restrains their sovereignty.

Noting this contradiction does not at all indicate agreement with those who enjoy the privileges linked to membership of this prosperous and select fortress Europe advising Ukraine to stay out of it. It is a mark of chauvinism of the privileged. Access to the EU labour market since 2004 has saved millions of Poles from poverty and hunger, and many Ukrainians know this well. In the countries of the EU, the left has the duty of solidarity with the excluded peoples of the East and South. The argument that socially catastrophic neoliberal reforms await them in the EU is totally false. Not only will they not avoid them by remaining outside, but they will be hit still harder by not being able to enjoy the benefits linked to belonging to an integrated Europe. On the contrary, inside the EU, they will have the possibility of resisting the neoliberal capitalist transformations together with other peoples. This is not to ignore the concerns of all those, of whom there are many also in Ukraine, who rightly fear that membership of a free trade zone with the EU will have dramatic consequences for their jobs and standard of living. However the right of nations to self-determination also means defending the democratic right of Ukraine to join the EU.

A mass democratic movement

No less paradoxical is another contradiction of the recent mass uprising in Ukraine. It is a democratic movement in its very essence, against a regime representing the interests of the powerful oligarchy of eastern Ukraine, known for its electoral frauds; an authoritarian regime, characterised by corruption and the pillage of the national wealth. This movement found its second breath and showed great élan and extraordinary determination in struggle when, on January 16, the docile parliament voted for radical restrictions on democratic liberties. Throughout the uprising it has maintained a very marked independence in relation to the main opposition parties, which it considered discredited.

The masses gathered in Kiev's Maidan never recognised the memorable trio of bluffers and posers as their leadership. It is the latter who have erected themselves as leaders, and it is in this capacity that they were vigorously hailed by the political élites of the EU and the international media. They led the movement nowhere; they would have led it only to defeat. They promised vague "measures which will be definitely effective this time", like for example a parliamentary vote limiting presidential power. All this to maintain the movement in a state of inertia, or at least to muzzle it, so that Yanukovych stayed in power. Without success. The masses at the Maidan would not follow them, and they were several times ridiculed and heckled. What dominated on the Maidan was self-organisation and an irreducible will to fight until victory: until the overthrow of the regime.

In the not so distant past, the nightmare of the global justice movement and numerous mass protests in Europe was combat groups which acted without their agreement, outside of any democratic control but on behalf of these movements. Whatever the banner under which they acted, they unconsciously reproduced in their practices far right ideologies which promote violence. Not surprising that they were very open to provocations leading to police repression against mass movements or provided the state with precious pretexts to repress them. Faced with extremely brutal police aggression, the Maidan had desperate need of self defence forces. It was however too weakly structured and consolidated to impose on any combat organisation subordination to its sovereign social power, avoiding thus the appearance of uncontrolled militias. The result of this weakness was the appearance around the strategic barricade of Hrushevsky street, near Maidan, of an armed force dominated by a coalition of far right commandos, the Right Sector.

A number of strange affairs surround this coalition, whose permeability led to provocations. For example the completely stupefying fact is that on Thursday February 20, as blood flowed in Maidan, Dmytro Yarosh, commander in chief of the Right Sector, met secretly with Yanukovich, something discovered by journalists after the fall of the latter. What did they talk about? Being put against the wall, Yarosh explained: "It concerned the agreement, like that signed later. I refused to sign. I told him we were not marionettes. And Viktor Fedorovich, withdraw the army, or there will be a guerrilla war throughout Ukraine. It was about saying that we would not give in, we would not lay down our arms, we would hold out until the end..." [3]. We know nothing more of this astonishing meeting, but it is a bombshell - maybe a time bomb.

A paradoxical alliance

The very important role played by this ultra-nationalist formation in the combats with the police threw a brown shadow over Maidan. Just like the presence among the three bluffers mentioned above of the leader of the radical right-wing nationalist party, Svoboda. Because of Svoboda's behaviour during these events it was called a "marauder of the revolution" by a Ukrainian observer [4]. Russian propaganda tried to use this shadow to discredit Maidan as a fascist or neo-Nazi movement [5]. To the extent that 40 Ukrainian and foreign historians specializing in Ukrainian nationalism deemed it necessary to react. Maidan, they said "is a liberationist and not extremist mass action of civic disobedience" Conscious of the risks that far right participation entailed for the Maidan, they called on the world's media not to suggest that the latter "is being infiltrated, driven or taken over by radically ethnocentrist groups of the lunatic fringe" asking them to take account of the fact that such suggestions were grist to the mill of Russian imperialism, which "is a far more serious threat to social justice, minority rights and political equality than all Ukrainian ethnocentrists taken together" [6].

It is a fact that the Maidan was the theatre of an astonishing alliance of the mass democratic movement with the far right militias. That is its second big contradiction. For this movement, it is a mortal danger. But big mass movements are never inoculated by History against dangers of any kind. Even movements already configured from the class viewpoint, let alone those which haven't been, like that in Ukraine, essentially learn from their own painstakingly accumulated experiences. They move forward cautiously on the political terrain, confirming their social nature and politically differentiating themselves through winding and entangled processes, following paths where dead ends and traps lie in wait for them. They are condemned to this fate for at least as long as they have not created their own organic political forces, able to propose action programmes and strategies.

Inside a people which - exposed to imperialist oppression, pressure or aggression - can still not resolve its own national question, such paradoxical combinations, like the above mentioned alliance,

are in fact inevitable. The reasons for this were explained by Mykola Khvylovy – Communist, writer and director of the Free Academy of Proletarian Literature – who killed himself in 1933 to protest against the massacre of his people perpetrated by Stalin; as, virtually at the same time, did the historic leader of the Ukrainian Communists, Mykola Skrypnyk. Some years previously, Khvylovy wrote these significant words: “If any nation (as has been stated a long time ago and repeated on more than one occasion) over the centuries demonstrates the will to manifest itself, its organism as a state entity, then all attempts in one way or another to hold back such a natural process block the formation of the class forces on the one hand, and, on the other, introduce an element of chaos into the general historical process at work in the world. To gloss over independence with a hollow pseudo-Marxism is to fail to understand that Ukraine will continue to be an arena for counter-revolution as long as it does not pass through the natural stage that Western Europe went through during the formation of nation-states” [7].

It is very difficult to pass through this stage when the neighbouring great power does not wish to loosen its grip on its former possession, threatening it with war and annexations; and when the new government of neoliberals and radical right nationalists, no less anti-popular than what preceded it, is creating for itself a new oligarchic base and is ready to subject the country to a rapacious capitalist globalization.

One thing is sure. This new wave of the contemporary springtime of peoples has swept away another régime, through long struggle and heavy sacrifices. For the first time, it has done so in Europe. It is a major event.

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P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint.

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Footnotes

[1] See Z.M. Kowalewski, “L’Ukraine: réveil d’un peuple, reprise d’une mémoire”, *Hérodote*, number 54-55, 1989; idem, „Miedzy wojna o historie a wyprawami kijowskimi”, *Le Monde diplomatique – Edycja polska*, number 1 (95), 2014.

[2] Z.M. Kowalewski, “L’Ukraine entre la Russie soviétique et l’Europe orientale”, *Nouvelle Europe*, number 3, 1990, p. 5.

[3] R. Malko, “Dmytro Yarosh: Moya zustrich iz Yanukovychem spravdi bula”, *Ukrayins’kyi Tyzhden’*, number 9 (329), 2014, p. 12.

[4] W. Rasewycz, “Swoboda, maruderzy rewolucji”, *Le Monde diplomatique – Edycja polska*, number 3 (97), 2014.

[5] Anton Shekhovtsov's blog is essential for understanding ultra-nationalism in Ukraine. See also A. Umland (ed.), "Post-Soviet Ukrainian Right-Wing Extremism", Russian Politics and Law, vol. 51, number 5, 2013.

[6] A. Umland et al., "Kyiv's Euromaidan is a Liberationist and not Extremist Mass Action of Civic Disobedience".

[7] M. Khvylovy, "The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine: Polemical Pamphlets, 1925-1926", Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1986, p. 227.