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# Yuliya Yurchenko: From Ukraine's independence to Russia's invasion

Tuesday 21 February 2023, by [FUENTES Federico](#), [YURCHENKO Yuliya](#) (Date first published: 3 February 2023).

**Ukrainian socialist and author of [Ukraine and the Empire of Capital](#) Yuliya Yurchenko discusses the key domestic factors that shaped Ukrainian politics from independence to Russia's invasion with Green Left's Federico Fuentes.**

**In your book, you insist on looking at domestic factors to understand how Ukraine got to where it is today. Why? Could you outline these factors?**

A lot of discussion on Ukraine revolves around international tensions — between NATO and Russia, or the United States and Russia — with Ukraine viewed as a blanket being pulled in different directions.

But we need to look at what has happened inside Ukraine to understand how we went from a country that voted overwhelmingly to become independent in 1991 — including in Crimea and Donbas — to the “referendum” to annex Crimea and the separatist “republics” in Donbas in 2014. Domestic dynamics are extremely important to understanding how irresponsible, self-serving local politicians created the conditions that made foreign interventions more possible.

In the 1990s, oligarchic groups emerged in different parts of Ukraine. At that time, Russia was weakened economically and politically destabilised. Russia's pull in the region had also been weakened. This created space for domestic capital in Ukraine to grow without too much foreign intervention.

By the end of the '90s, an important bloc of energy-intensive industrial capital had emerged in the east with strong economic ties to [Russian president Vladimir] Putin's regime, due to reliance on gas imports.

Out of these different oligarchic groups emerged leaders who competed for political power. One was Viktor Yanukovych — linked to this Donbas industrial capital in the east — who ran in the fraudulent 2004 elections that led to the Orange Revolution, and again in 2010 against then incumbent president Viktor Yushchenko.

Their 2010 electoral campaigns were framed at winning the votes of the majority of people in either the east (Yanukovych) or west (Yushchenko). This divisive political framing of election campaigns was pivotal in solidifying the idea of “two Ukraines”.

**Did Russia play any role in fomenting this idea and, if so, why?**

Russia started promoting the idea of *Rusky Mir* (“Russian World”) [which encompasses all Russian speakers] years before the 2013–14 events through local media outlets, particularly in Crimea and Donbas, which have the largest ethnically Russian populations within Ukraine.

Russia's imperial ambitions were reinvigorated with the fall of the Soviet Union. We can see this in Putin's speeches where he refers to Ukraine as little more than a province of Russia — one without its own political subjectivity, its own culture, its own language. Putin's fascism is built on a narrative not of differences but sameness: that we are all the same people who speak the same language and, therefore, must all be in the same country.

By understanding the historical relationship between Ukraine and Russia of extermination and exclusion of Ukrainian language, culture and literature, you start to understand why so many people in Ukraine are bilingual or just speak Russian and do not speak Ukrainian very well.

This vision of a shared destiny was part of Russia's claims over Donbas, but there is an economic component too. There are a lot of industries in Donbas — and in the south of Ukraine — that are deeply integrated with Russian industry, making components for its military and other production lines that Russia does not want to lose control over.

Up until 2014, Russia tried soft indoctrination to maintain its influence and control in Ukraine; but when that failed it turned to military intervention.

### **What about the role of Ukraine's moves to integrate into the European Union?**

Under Yushchenko, you had a process of Ukraine-EU rapprochement, in which a free trade agreement was signed. By 2013, Yanukovich's government was about to sign the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement it helped draft. But Yanukovich refused to sign at the last minute due to pressure from Russia and some local oligarchs.

Had Yanukovich managed to maintain close cooperation with Russia and handed over actual decision-making to Russia, maybe the subsequent war and invasion would not have happened. But Ukrainians did not agree to that.

### **And this is what kicked off the Maidan protests?**

The protests began with Yanukovich's refusal to sign the agreement, but Maidan did not properly kick off until the night of November 30, when Yanukovich sent police to beat up protesters in the main square of Kyiv.

After that, the protests became massive, with over a million people gathering in Kyiv, a city of just a few million people. Protesters now demanded Yanukovich's resignation and immediate elections, with protests spreading to squares all across Ukraine, including Donetsk, Luhansk, Odesa and Crimea.

Surveys done about a week after the protests found the main reasons people attended were police brutality, lawlessness, corruption and social economic deprivation. The EU agreement was seventh or eighth on the list.

Maidan was not a Western-planted coup, it was an expression of dissent and frustration. It was a protest movement that had been brewing for decades. There were many protests in the years leading up to it over socio-economic problems, against predatory real estate developers, against corruption, against police impunity. People were sick of all that.

### **Yet out of Maidan emerged what you refer to as "authoritarian fascicising neoliberal kleptocracy"...**

To understand why I talk about authoritarian fascicisation and neoliberal kleptocracy in post-2014

Ukraine, we need to understand who Petro Poroshenko was and how he came to be president.

Poroshenko had been on the scene of Ukrainian mainstream politics for decades. He is an oligarch who held all sorts of important seats prior to his election in 2014. When Poroshenko and other oligarchs and politicians addressed protesters demanding Yanukovich's resignation, they were booed because they were seen as part of the same oligarchic regime of neoliberal kleptocracy that people wanted to do away with.

After Yanukovich fled, Putin said the new Ukrainian interim president and government were illegitimate, that there had been a coup, and that therefore Russia had to liberate people in Ukraine from this "junta". Putin then moved to annex Crimea and his stooges started a war in Donbas.

Under the Ukrainian constitution, the elected president is also the Commander-in-Chief of the army, and only they can take the country to war. The oligarchs, in particular Poroshenko, utilised this conjuncture to say: "Look we understand that everyone wants to change the people in government; we understand your frustration. But we have a war in the country and we need to act fast. We need someone who has experience and knows how to coordinate the military. We need someone in charge *pronto*, so we need to elect a president in the first round to organise the military to defend Donbas."

This was the discourse that got him elected in the spring of 2014. He would not have won if the war in Donbas had not started. The end result was that the achievements of the revolution were hijacked by these oligarchs.

It is also important to note that following the blood that was spilt in Maidan, unsavoury right-wing forces began organising self-defence groups to protect protesters. Together with citizens of all ilks, they formed volunteer battalions that went to fight in Donbas. The widespread message of these groups that I heard personally was: "Once we kick the Russians out, we're going to deal with the crooks in the government".

Poroshenko sought to absorb some of the nationalist, patriotic rhetoric of the volunteer battalion into his 2019 election campaign, trying to bank on "army, language, faith" and his support for "these heroes". It cost him his presidency.

In reality, peoples' frustration did not go away. Instead, there was a sense that now was not the time to destabilise the government because there is a war.

### **How does Zelensky fit into this picture?**

Over 40% of those who voted for Zelensky in 2019 did so as a protest vote against Poroshenko and his authoritarian fascicisation. Those who paint Ukrainians as Nazis should take note of this: even as the country was engaged in a war in which Russia said Ukraine was not a nation, Ukrainians did not want the right wing in government.

But, of course, there is a right wing that waves certain types of flags and says we do not want any other ethnicities, and there is a right wing that supports neoliberal economic policies. Zelensky and his party, the Servant of the People, have bought into the neoliberal cult of deregulation and less state.

While Zelensky is very popular today, what one forgets is that his ratings were going through the floor just before the invasion, because he was elected on popular slogans but did not deliver on any of them.

Deregulation does not work in peacetime, let alone in wartime. The state needs to step in. These free

marketeers will need to learn fast and work hard to create a state that will ensure those who have paid the highest price in this war reap the greatest benefit from the rebuilding of the country they are fighting for.

Otherwise, the government runs the risk that people will seek to finish what they did not finish in 2014 — but now with weapons in their hands.

[The full version of this interview will appear on [links.org.au](https://links.org.au)]

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**Federico Fuentes**  
**Yuliya Yurchenko**

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