

Ukraine: Days of Decisions, Days of Struggle

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The political face of the Kiev protests causes grave pessimism. But a revolution is a revolution and the left has no right to stay on the side, says Ilya Budraitskis.

What is happening in Ukraine right now increasingly corresponds to the classical definition of a revolutionary situation. The mass movement, once it has come out in the streets, is ready to defend them in harsh confrontations with the police. The slogans, which initially gave birth to the movement, have now given way to the main question of any revolution—the question of power. Hesitations and practically open disunity within the elites, world leaders' involvement on this or that side, behind-the-scenes negotiations, conspiracies and mass media manipulations all depend on the movement, on its dynamics, on its readiness to go to the last consequence. This strange revolution has no alternative project to offer—neither politically nor socially. But it exists as a process and its participants, as the participants of any revolution, experience their role in history here and now.

All of this is true—and this is why we have no cause for optimism. For the other part of the story is that, if victorious, the revolution will bring forth a coalition government of rightists and ultra-rightists and Ukraine risks becoming the biggest brown spot on the map of the already right-leaning Eastern Europe. Instead of fighting for their rights and collectively improving their actual lives, the citizens of this poor country, embittered by corruption and lawlessness, have been waving national flags in dumb ecstasy and battling with the symbols of a distant past.

This indisputable irrationality of the Ukrainian situation serves as the best excuse for the passivity of those who tend to see in revolutions primarily the act of the oppressed people's ultimate realization of their "objective interests." Before us, without doubt, we have an "incorrect" and thus doomed revolution, which nevertheless does not cease to be a revolution. The illusions of its participants, however nonsensical they may be, aren't a mere result of a collective descent into madness, but are a logical product of the society that gave birth to them.

Leftists commentators have justly and copiously written that Ukraine's signing the EU free trade agreement will destroy Ukraine's industry, together with thousands of workplaces, and in its aftermath, ordinary people will find themselves hostages in the conflicts of interests of bourgeois clans. Such analyses, however, often relegate ideology to a secondary role, to a mere expression of "false consciousness." But when it comes to the content of the revolutionary process—and moreover, to the struggle for this content,—ideological questions become central. In post-Soviet societies, where social fragmentation has reached its possible limit, hopes for political solidarity, for some form of cooperation among people, are born out quite literally out of trash. The problem lies not merely in the degenerating educational system or the political culture poisoned by corruption and lies for many decades now. The unnaturalness of "social demands" to both Moscow of 2011 and Kiev of 2013—and this unsightly paradox has been frequently noted by leftist activists, who have persistently attempt to "introduce" them—is connected with the destructive work of the triumphant neoliberal market. The destruction spreads well beyond the economy: it extends into to collective consciousness, into our ability to trust each other and act together. This trust founded on common interests has been replaced by a vague nostalgia for such a trust, by rebellious exhaustion from

one's own suspicion or from the logic of competition, which has penetrated all aspects of everyday life. This exhaustion finds expression in the political language of the Euromaydan—not the ideal politics of equality and justice but the only politics popularly available in today's Ukraine.

In her perceptive analysis, the Ukrainian activist Olga Papash wonders about the smooth coexistence of the slogans of Eurointegration and an atavistic rhetoric of ethnic nationalism. She reveals the point where these seemingly mutually exclusive ideologies converge and give birth to the strange synthesis that currently animates the Ukrainian protests. This is the away-from-Moscow vector, which unites the century-old tradition of Ukrainian nationalism (not necessarily reactionary, but anti-imperialist, emancipatory), the steady line of post-Soviet Ukrainian elite, which has sought through its policy of nationalizing life to legitimate itself in the eyes of its subjects, and finally, perfectly founded fears of the aggressiveness of Russian corporations and Kremlin's authoritarian power, which services them. Over the last decade, the growing aggression of the Russian elites, their efforts to inscribe Ukraine into the sphere of their commercial interests, sometimes expressed in (Russian) chauvinist propaganda, has almost deliberately reawakened all the myths of Ukrainian nationalism.

Today the question of undermining the nationalist hegemony in Ukraine is directly related to the ability of the Russian left and progressive forces to represent another Russia, a Russia, embodying those ideals of genuine democracy, equality, and social liberation, which back in the day also defined the Ukrainian liberation movement. It is precisely this version of "progressive patriotism" that holds, in my opinion, the best chance for our Ukrainian comrades. After all, slogans such as "Communists—on the gallows!" and "Death to the enemy!" (two of the most frequently chanted slogans at the Euromaydan) don't represent a legitimate continuation of the tradition of Ivan Franko, Vladimir Vinnichenko, or Mikola Khvylovy.

The second component of the ideological centaurus of Ukraine's right-wing opposition—the demand for democracy, people's control, and transparency—must also be challenged by the left. It is precisely from the position of direct democracy that we must challenge the claims of the Yatsenyuk-Klichko-Tyahnynibok triumvirate to monopolize the movement as well as the physical censorship implemented by the commandoes of the ultra-nationalist Freedom party.

Ilya Budraitskis, 17 December 2013

P.S.

* <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/ukraine-days-of-struggle/>

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