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Second Revolution on Euromaidan: What Next for Ukraine?

by Nona Mikhelidze

ABSTRACT

The rapid succession of events in Ukraine is impressive but the story is far from over: the state faces an economic crisis and the risk of default; pro-Russian separatism in Crimea threatens the territorial integrity of the country. How should the new government deal with these old challenges and what role could be envisaged for the EU and the US to assist Ukraine in this difficult moment of its statehood? The main objective of the Ukrainian government should be to stand united to overcome the monumental economic, social and political crisis. The EU and the US should encourage coalition-building initiatives to achieve this end. As for the separatist claims, Kiev needs to be more proactive in accommodating minority rights, while the EU should boost people-to-people contacts and promote cooperation between western and eastern Ukrainian civil society. In order to encourage long-lasting political and social reforms, the EU should begin to talk about Ukraine's membership perspective. On the international level, the West should acknowledge that Russia is part of the problem, but also an indispensable part of the solution. Securing Ukraine's integration within the EU, but maintaining the neutrality of its security posture may be a possible way out

Ukraine | Russia | European Union | USA | NATO | Crimea

keywords

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Introduction

"Today our whole country can see the sun and the sky, because today the dictatorship fell. And it was not knocked down by politicians or diplomats, but by the people".¹ These are the words of Yulia Tymoshenko, and they sum up well what happened on EuroMaidan a few days ago. Indeed the second revolution in Ukraine occurred thanks to ordinary citizens. True, the cost of self-determination and democracy was high - more than 80 deaths and over 600 injured - but the result, for the time being, defies classic *realpolitik*: the destiny of the country has been shaped by its citizens and not merely by great power politics.

On 20 February, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Radoslaw Sikorski, called for a compromise, arguing that the demonstrators had to settle for less than one hundred percent of their demands being met.² Nonetheless, the people rejected the agreement³ between the government and the opposition brokered by the Polish, German and French foreign ministers, and continued to demand the resignation of President Yanukovich and immediate presidential elections. On 22 February, the parliament voted for the release of Yulia Tymoshenko, ex-prime minister and former opposition leader, and decided to restore the 2004 Constitution that

¹ "Ukrainian Parliament Votes To Oust President, Tymoshenko Released From Jail", in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 22 February 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-parliament-tymoshenko-release/25273412.html>.

² Sikorski on his Twitter account, 21 February 2014: <https://twitter.com/sikorskiradek/status/436816936765509632>.

³ Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Poland's top diplomat mediates to resolve Ukraine's crisis*, 21 February 2014, http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/news/poland_s_top_diplomat_mediates_to_resolve_ukraine_s_crisis. See also the remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council on Ukraine, 20 February 2014, http://www.eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/140220_02_en.pdf.

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envisaged rebalanced competences between the president and the legislature, in favour of the latter.⁴ The speaker of the *Verkhovna Rada*, Volodymyr Rybak, resigned and was replaced by Tymoshenko's ally, Oleksandr Tuchynov. The same day, the parliament voted to dismiss President Viktor Yanukovich and to hold early presidential elections on May 25.⁵

This rapid succession of events is impressive but the story is far from over: Ukraine faces an economic crisis and the risk of default; pro-Russian separatism in Crimea threatens the territorial integrity of the country. How should the new government deal with these old challenges and what role could be envisaged for the EU and the US to assist Ukraine in this difficult moment of its statehood?

1. A new government facing old challenges

Fears that Ukraine's economy is risking default have caused panic in international markets - with country bond yields rising sharply and the *hryvnia* losing a tenth of its value in recent weeks. Standard and Poor's has predicted that Ukraine will default on its USD billion of debt, if Russia does not maintain its promise to assist Ukraine with USD 15 billion.⁶ Endemic corruption at all levels of government and business (Ukraine is ranked 144th out of 177 countries in the Transparency International *Corruption Perceptions Index*⁷) has led the country down a blind alley.

In addition to the sharp economic crisis, Ukraine also faces the problem of territorial integrity. With the recent developments, the spectre of partition has resurfaced. On 20 February, the speaker of the Crimean parliament, Volodymyr Konstantynov, declared that Crimea might separate from Ukraine⁸ and turn to Russia for protection. At the same time, the *Financial Times* quoted a senior Russian government official saying that Moscow was prepared to fight a war over Crimea to protect the ethnic Russian population and its military base there (the Crimean city of Sevastopol hosts Russia's Black Sea Fleet until 2042). "We will go in and protect [it], just as we

⁴ Ukrainian Parliament resolutions of 22 February 2014 "On fulfilling international obligations of Ukraine regarding releasing Tymoshenko Yu.V.", <http://portal.rada.gov.ua/en/news/News/News/page/en/news/News/News/88150.html>; and "On the text of the Constitution of Ukraine in the version of June 28, 1996 ...", <http://portal.rada.gov.ua/en/news/News/News/page/en/news/News/News/88197.html>.

⁵ Ukrainian Parliament resolution "On self-withdrawal of the President of Ukraine from performing his constitutional duties and setting early elections of the President of Ukraine", 22 February 2014, <http://portal.rada.gov.ua/en/news/News/News/page/en/news/News/News/88138.html>.

⁶ Eugene Rumer, "Ukraine: glimmer of hope, but many unanswered questions", in *Eurasia Outlook*, 21 February 2014, <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=54608>.

⁷ See Transparency International website: <http://www.transparency.org/country#UKR>.

⁸ "Konstantynov: Crimea may secede from Ukraine if 'country splits'", in *Kyiv Post*, 20 February 2014, <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/konstantynov-crimea-may-secede-from-ukraine-if-country-splits-337212.html>.

did in Georgia”, he stated.⁹ In Crimea, which was transferred from the Russian Soviet Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in 1954, ethnic Russians make up almost 60% of the population, with Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars accounting for the rest. Its links to the ethnic Russians gives Russia additional leverage on Kiev’s foreign policy choices and makes it more confident that Ukraine will not question the contract on the Sevastopol base in the short run.

Some analysts argue that Konstantynov’s statements could mask an attempt by the Yanukovych-connected elites of the region to seek greater autonomy from the new government.¹⁰ In any case, the risk of a military escalation in Crimea will depend on whether the new government in Kiev accepts the pro-Yanukovych elites in the East and South in the interest of national reconciliation and unity. In view of the already tense situation, the law recently passed by Ukraine’s parliament, which removed Russian as an official language was not a wise move.¹¹ Apart from this decision, it is not clear at the moment how Kiev intends to reinstate its authority over East Ukraine.

The origins of all these challenges are embedded in the Ukrainian political establishment. Over the years, Ukrainian politicians have failed to formulate a national policy aiming at genuine reunification and modernisation, and to make a clear strategic choice in their foreign policy orientation. Characterised by opportunistic political alliances, the state has appealed to different external actors, or to all of them at the same time, in pursuit of its short-term interests. “As a result, the rival groups in Ukraine did not move to meet each other in the middle but away from each other, seeking to gain the most from the war between the lords”.¹² This was also the case between ex-President Yushenko and Prime Minister Tymoshenko. Unfortunately there are already some rumours about the rivalry between two of Tymoshenko’s top allies - Arseniy Yatsenyuk and the new acting President, Oleksandr Turchynov.¹³ Learning from the past, the political establishment should unite in order to deal with the economic crisis and secessionism threatening Ukraine.

⁹ Kathrin Hille and Roman Olearchyk, “Russia rattles sabre over fate of Crimea”, in *Financial Times*, 20 February 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/84909a9e-9a55-11e3-8e06-00144feab7de.html>.

¹⁰ Mark Galeotti cited in Robert Coalson, “As pace of political change picks up In Kyiv, Eastern Ukraine balks”, in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 22 February 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/eastern-ukraine-political-change--analysis/25273874.html>.

¹¹ On February 23, 2014, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted the law “On recognizing the Law of Ukraine ‘On the Principles of State Language Policy’ as void”: <http://portal.rada.gov.ua/en/news/News/News/page/en/news/News/News/88106.html>. See also OSCE, *Restraint, responsibility and dialogue needed in Ukraine, including Crimea ...*, 24 February 2014, <http://www.osce.org/hcnm/115643>; Council of Europe, *Report on the application of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in Ukraine* (ECRML (2014) 3), 15 January 2014, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/Report/default_en.asp#Ukraine.

¹² Fyodor Lukyanov, “In Ukraine, no choice and no future”, in *Valdai Discussion Club*, 20 February 2014, http://valdaiclub.com/near_abroad/66960.html.

¹³ “What next for Ukraine?”, in *BBC News Europe*, 23 February 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26312733>.

2. What role for the EU and the US?

During the dramatic events on Maidan, one of the placards reflected all the frustrations the Ukrainians were feeling towards the European Union: "EU, thank you for your deep concern, now do something!"¹⁴ Indeed the EU should not forget that the crisis in Ukraine started because of "the disappointed hopes of millions of Ukrainians who wanted for their country a closer relationship with the European Union".¹⁵ For Ukraine, the idea of Europe represents a new future envisaging modernisation and transparent and clean politics. Russia offered USD 15 billion to give relief to the Ukrainian economy,¹⁶ but the people know that accepting this offer means dealing with Russian-style oligarchs and thus living indefinitely with persistent economic stagnation.¹⁷ Therefore, Ukraine's preference for Europe does not have only an international dimension but also, and perhaps above all, a domestic one. The EU is the symbol of change and a chance to leave the post-Soviet model of governance behind. That is why the EU is more popular in Ukraine (and in general in the EU's eastern neighbourhood) than amongst EU member states. "There is no other country in Europe where people put so much passion and are prepared to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the European idea".¹⁸ So the way the EU responds to the expectations of Ukrainians is of the essence for the very idea of Europe.

The Western community should act in several domains: humanitarian assistance and financial aid, political support for the new government and pressure on it to maintain unity and, finally, a transatlantic strategy to engage Russia on the Ukrainian issue. The EU should sign the Association Agreement with Ukraine in the immediate future and assist the country in covering all the social costs entailed in Ukraine's accession to the Deep Free Trade Area with the European Union. Initially the aid should be unconditional. Only as and when Ukraine begins to recover, could the IMF and the EU begin to condition assistance on compliance with political reforms. Furthermore, the EU can no longer skirt the issue of membership with its Eastern neighbours. Brussels should acknowledge that without such a

¹⁴ Kateryna Pishchikova and Richard Youngs, "The European Union and the Crafting of Durable Reform in Ukraine", in *Eurasia Outlook*, 29 January 2014, <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=54351>.

¹⁵ Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski cited in "Ukraine's Parliament, President agree to opposition demands", in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21 February 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-presidency-agreement-eu-cautious/25272042.html>.

¹⁶ "Russia may use IMF special drawing rights as part of Ukraine's \$15 billion bailout", in *Reuters*, 27 December 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/27/us-ukraine-bailout-idUSBRE9BQ09F20131227>.

¹⁷ Daryna Krasnolutska, Olga Tanas and Ilya Arkhipov, "Ukraine Protesters Want Answers on \$15 Billion Russia Aid", in *Bloomberg*, 18 December 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-12-17/russia-commits-15-billion-to-ukraine-bonds-as-gas-price-reduced.html>.

¹⁸ Marcin Zaborowski, "Guest post: what can the EU do to help Ukraine?", in *beyondbrics* (FT blog), 24 February 2014, <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2014/02/24/guest-post-what-can-the-eu-do-to-help-ukraine>.

perspective these countries will not carry out genuine reforms aiming at the long-term development of democracy and stability. In order to promote the European model of governance, the EU should work with civil society and engage intensively with public policy especially in the Eastern part of Ukraine, where the image of the international community and of the West in particular is largely tainted.

Several steps in this direction have already been taken: the German Chancellor Angela Merkel called Yulia Tymoshenko and urged her to work for unity, whereas in her talk with Russian President Vladimir Putin she underlined that Ukraine's "territorial integrity" must be safeguarded.¹⁹ Some German government officials have called for the release of immediate financial aid to Ukraine.²⁰ Furthermore, EU High Representative Catherine Ashton visited Kiev to discuss EU support "for a lasting solution to the political crisis and measures to stabilise the economic situation".²¹ It is still unclear, however, to what extent the West will follow up on its rhetoric and make more substantial offers to Ukraine.

Until now, Western policy towards the Eastern Neighbourhood has been driven by events rather than by strategy. The time has come for more effective US leadership and cooperation with the EU to devise a transatlantic strategy to deal with Ukraine in the long run and engage Russia in this process. Recently, US President Barack Obama declared that Ukraine is not a square on a Cold War chessboard.²² Yet, that is exactly how Russian President Vladimir Putin perceives it in light of the creation of the Eurasian Union. Without Ukraine, "Putin's Eurasian project is really just Moscow and a bunch of central Asian dictators".²³ Furthermore, if Kiev draws closer to Brussels and transitions towards democracy, "what does that say about the Kremlin? ... [Clearly it is] a threat to the Putin regime itself".²⁴

There is no point in irritating the Kremlin further. Rather, the West needs to accommodate Moscow's interests in the region. In a recent article in the *Financial Times*, Zbigniew Brzezinski argued that the Finnish model could be ideal for

¹⁹ German Government, *A chance for democracy*, 24 February 2014, <http://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/Content/EN/Artikel/2014/02/2014-02-24-ukraine-chance-fuer-demokratie.html>; "Merkel, Putin say Ukraine must remain intact", in *Reuters*, 23 February 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/02/23/ukraine-crisis-merkel-idUKL6N0LS0MK20140223>.

²⁰ "Ukraine: Speaker Oleksandr Turchynov named interim president", in *BBC News Europe*, 23 February 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26312008>.

²¹ European Union External Action, *Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the end of her visit to Ukraine*, Brussels, 25 February 2014, http://www.eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/140225_01_en.pdf; European Commission, *EU response to events in Ukraine* (Speech/14/162), 26 February 2014, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-14-162_en.htm.

²² White House, *Press Conference by President Obama, President Peña Nieto, and Prime Minister Harper*, 19 February 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/19/press-conference-president-obama-president-pe-nieto-and-prime-minister-h>.

²³ Donald Jensen, former political officer in the US embassy in Moscow, cited by Mark Mardell, "Ukraine crisis: Why Russia and EU both stand to lose", in *BBC News Europe*, 21 February 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-26299178>.

²⁴ Ibidem.

Ukraine, where the interests of all actors, Russia included, are taken into account. This means that Ukraine would not participate in military alliances, especially NATO, but would only cooperate closely with the EU.²⁵ Putin has always opposed the idea of Ukraine joining NATO and warned the West to keep its hands off "Little Russia".²⁶ The West must reassure the Kremlin that Ukraine will not be part of the Atlantic Alliance.

Conclusion

The main objective of the Ukrainian government should be to stand united to overcome the monumental economic, social and political crisis the country is facing. The EU and the US should encourage coalition-building initiatives to achieve this end. As for the separatist claims in the eastern parts of the country, Kiev needs to be more proactive in accommodating minority rights, while the EU should boost people-to-people contacts and promote cooperation between western and eastern Ukrainian civil society. In order to encourage long-lasting political and social reforms, the EU should begin to talk about Ukraine's membership perspective. Avoiding the issue is no longer an option.

On the international level, the West should acknowledge that Russia is part of the problem, but also an indispensable part of the solution. Had it not been for Russia's interference in Ukraine's choice to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, the subsequent dramatic events would not have happened.²⁷ Therefore the EU together with the US should engage Russia on Ukraine in order to devise a win-win strategy. Securing Ukraine's integration within the EU, but maintaining the neutrality of its security posture may be a possible way out.

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²⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Russia needs a 'Finland option' for Ukraine", in *Financial Times*, 23 February 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/7f722496-9c86-11e3-b535-00144feab7de.html>.

²⁶ Frida Ghitis, "'New' Russia in Sochi: Same old Russia in Ukraine", in *CNN.com*, 20 February 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/19/opinion/ghitis-ukraine-sochi>.

²⁷ Marcin Zaborowski, "Guest post: what can the EU do to help Ukraine?", cit.

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