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Ukraine

Ukraine's Protest Movement: Is a 'Left Sector' Possible?

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Back in mid-December, our estimate of Ukraine's political crisis as a "revolutionary situation" resulted in a lot of critical reviews. Further, the use of the word "revolution" in the context of Ukraine was condemned as a kind of sacrilege, because the events in Kiev appeared to be totally incomparable to the grandeur of past revolutions. There are no proclamations about the beginning of a new world, and no discussions of the socialization of property, while the social order established over the last two decades of post-Soviet rule has itself not been called into question. But a revolution's political content may not totally correspond to its dynamics: the masses' actual experience, their determination and ability to organize on their own, may be far ahead of their "political imagination." And if the revolution fails simply by virtue of a lack of independent political projects, it never ceases to be a revolution.

The revolution's chief, unmistakable, defining sign – the emergence of the insurgent masses – is the driving force of this story. Those who continue to characterize the events in Ukraine as a "conflict of the elites" or a "clash between bourgeois clans" miss the most important thing: the Maidan collective (which includes activists in half the regions of Ukraine who are challenging the country's administration) has become an independent political factor that neither the authorities nor the leaders of the parliamentary opposition can easily manipulate. Without the perseverance and sacrifices of these people over the last month, there probably would have been a dozen "appeasement" scenarios ranging from a police dictatorship to some kind of collusive agreement between Yanukovich's enemies – either of which would satisfy the aim of removing Yanukovich from power and from the monetary backing of Ukraine's political and financial elites.

The appeal to Yatseniuk to head the government over the weekend was followed in short order by Azarov's resignation and the cancelation of the scandalous "January 16 laws," and, finally, the opposition parties' sincere help in restoring control of administration buildings occupied by protestors – the true signs of a consensus on both sides. Yanukovich, the opposition, the European Union, and Putin are all united in a bid for the "normalization" of Ukraine. The only unpredictable and incomprehensible item standing in the way of negotiations towards mutually beneficial agreements is the fact that thousands of determined people refuse to leave Maidan. Their determination unmistakably looks more than anything like a democratic instinct: citizens remain citizens as long as they stick together and are able to respond with violence to whoever seeks to destroy their armed unity.

This direct democracy, though born from direct experience, has no political continuation. Further, its forcefully organized shock troops – which helped the majority of protesters to do away with the remains of whatever respectful distance they kept from the state and the police – became a fundamentally anti-democratic force. Paradoxically, without the ultra-right proponents of a "national dictatorship" from the Right Sector, there would never have been any barricades on Hrushevskogo or occupied ministries turned into "headquarters of the revolution." There would not be, full stop, any of the events that actually prevented the consolidation of a "party of order" and the establishment of a "state of emergency" from above. The realization of this simple fact cannot but terrify – not only mass dissatisfaction with the sitting government, but the far-right's willingness to overthrow this government and establish its own, rapidly monopolizing the political space and transforming it into one of extreme reaction.

One's first moments on Maidan are like being in some kind of political Wonderland: there are street fighters doing battle with police, self-managed campgrounds, information centers, points of mutual aid, self-organized "emergency services," and hot meals. It is a paradigmatic example of an infrastructure of urban uprising, each element of which breathes an authentic revolutionary consciousness, painted in some strange, unusual color – a kaleidoscope of propaganda from every possible ultra-right-wing party and sect, with countless "Celtic" symbols and runes on the

walls. The incredibly sickening dissonance between the revolutionary content of the process and its reactionary form represents circumstances demanding not squeamish ethical evaluations, but action aimed at changing such an ugly equation.

Of course, nobody in this revolution reserved any space for leftists – that being, for those who could really come up with an alternative to the entire established order that gave birth to poverty, corruption, lack of transparency, and state brutality. In fact the order that gave birth to all of the factors, without exception, that led people to the streets and to begin their resistance. Today's crisis in Ukraine is really a crisis of the society we want to change. Society is degraded, embittered, disintegrating. It experiences any optimism about itself only slightly, and rarely at that. The products of this society and its rare – and therefore crucial – optimism are the current revolutionary events. Nationalism (which at this point is still more civil than ethnic), a strange belief in the power of “European integration,” parliamentary institutions, the lack of resistance to chauvinism, and a desire to find and neutralize viruses in the healthy “national” body: all of these reflect Ukrainian society's current consciousness, which in any case is not static or incapable of change. And despite the fact that initial conditions were far more favorable to the expansion of the ultra-right, the outcome for this battle for consciousness and a revolutionary program was never predetermined – and cannot be conclusively summed up even today.

I understand completely how vulnerable my reasoning will look, but I still feel that this conversation – about the necessity and possibility of a “Left Sector” and its struggle for hegemony in the protest – is important not only in the contemporary Ukrainian context, but also for the future, in which we will face similar (if not worse) circumstances every time.

I remember well how, just after the first mass rally on Chistoprudny Boulevard on December 5, 2011, a meeting was organized between the representatives of virtually every Moscow leftist group in existence. After a stormy debate, and regardless of the differences in ideological traditions and approaches, a majority of the participants agreed about the following: 1) the incipient protest was ours, and we would participate in it, and 2) understanding full well its political and social heterogeneity, we would fight for our place in it. This was the necessary minimum amount of political unity, the result of which was the systematic presence of the radical left in the protest movement, and, most importantly, the movement's participants' perception of leftists as an organic part. The movement's emerging “red pole” clearly contrasted itself with the conservative approach of the Communist Party, which was actually working for the restoration of the lost stability of the political “managed democracy” machine.

As far as I know, nothing of the kind happened in December 2013 in Kiev. Ukraine's radical leftists embraced the nascent protests only skeptically, resigning themselves to strictly passive or peripheral roles. Those who decided to support the movement and to participate in it did so only individually, without coordination. Meanwhile, ultra-right groups could boast the best potential in terms of personnel – even better than that of their Russian colleagues – and as such the best opportunities from the very beginning. They systematically forced small groups of left-wing demonstrators out of the fray. What would have happened if, from the very beginning, gathering all its available forces (I think this could be several hundred people), the radical left had consistently asserted its right to be on Maidan and openly promote its position? It is likely that, if faced with such an organized mass leftist presence, the right would have abstained from open conflict due, ultimately, to the threat of a negative impact on its public image among the majority of non-partisan protesters.

Staking out space for a Left Sector would be crucial not only for the current moment, and not only for the search for supporters among the hundreds of thousands of protesters. It would allow for the construction of radical left forces in the post-revolutionary situation – which will probably be in the near future – when, finally, the Communist Part of Ukraine (KPU) puts a close to its ignominious existence. The current demand for a ban on the KPU (along with the Russian-speaking Party of Regions) – the protestors' call for which is growing louder all the time – is connected not only with the anti-Communist tradition, but just as much with the KPU's political program, which has linked its fate inextricably with the oligarchic clans and the reactionary pro-Russian lobby. From the very beginning of the crisis,

the KPU unequivocally opposed the protest movement, calling on police to exact reprisals and, of course, supporting the "January 16 laws" unconditionally. Meanwhile a Left Sector, representing itself from the start as a part of the protest movement, could have rightfully challenged the accepted conflation of socialist alternatives in Ukraine with the bastard party of Petr Simonenko. A Left Sector could not only have been strengthened the movement from the inside, but could have also offered it an agenda, developed its radical-democratic vector, and supported and given a conscious political dimension to the creation of the "people's councils" in the occupied regional administrations.

Alas, today, much is lost. The forces of stability, obviously, will prevail, and Ukraine will return to the shaky model of oligarchic consensus of competing clans and electoral parties. At the same time, nothing will be the same: having destroyed the fear of government force, the taste for resistance will remain in the flesh and blood of a politically active generation along with the experience of building barricades on Maidan. And this means that, more likely than not, history will provide Ukraine's radical left with at least a few more chances to learn from its mistakes.

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