



Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko speaks to the Canadian Parliament in the House of Commons weeks before the October 26 parliamentary elections. The changes occurring in Ukraine are social, widespread, and deep. Deb Ransom, PMO photo

## Ukraine One Year After the Euromaidan: Amid an Undeclared War, Deep Social Change

Yaroslav Baran

*A year after Kyiv's Euromaidan protests ousted Vladimir Putin proxy Victor Yanukovich and unleashed the most significant crisis in East-West relations since the Cold War, Ukraine is still changing. In its politics, its media, its national identity and, most of all, its ultimate rejection of "Homo Sovieticus", the country is as noticeably different from its former self as it is from any other country in Europe.*

A handsome couple walks down St. Andrew's Street, arm in arm, admiring the street paintings and architecture in this trendy and touristy corner of downtown Kyiv. They gaze at art, and at the beauty of the ancient winding roadway. They gaze at each other. They duck under an archway and kiss. Judging by this scene, this could be any major city in Europe—cobblestones, architecture, an artsy vibe, street lamps and romance.

But this city is different. It's the capital of a country the size of France, in the midst of an undeclared war with a former superpower: Russia. Moreover, it's days after an election—a high-stakes election, called by the new president to “clean the fifth columnists out of Parliament”—and by fifth columnists, he means the henchmen of Vladimir Putin. He means the MPs of the former Party of Regions, loyal to Putin proxy Victor Yanukovich, the MPs who voted for the draconian anti-protest laws that transformed Euromaidan from a student protest to a mass populist revolution. He is talking about the MPs who supported the regime that ordered snipers to shoot at their own people.

There are changes happening in this country—far beyond the regime change that occurred when Yanukovich fled the Euromaidan crowds and took refuge in Russia, far beyond the new pro-democracy and pro-European presidency of Petro Poroshenko, and far beyond the fact that Ukraine has since lost two provinces to a Russian invasion and faces active military combat against Russian regular soldiers and Russian-supplied mercenaries in two others.

The changes occurring in Ukraine are social. They are widespread. They are deep. And they may be the wave of social revolution that finally propels Ukraine forward, out of the shackles of its post-Soviet legacy and into the modern age as a fully functioning democracy that respects the rule of law, and respects its people above the interests of those in power.

**T**aken together, the zeitgeist of today's Ukraine is antithetical to the greatest obstacle the country faced in its post-Soviet progress: the phenomenon of the *Homo Sovieticus*. Coined by Soviet dissident Alexander Zinoviev as a satirical response to the Stalin's *New Soviet Man* concept, the *Homo Sovieticus* was the true legacy of 80 years of communist hegemony: indifference, cynicism, passive acceptance of government's actions, and unwillingness to strive for change.

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A granddaughter watches her grandmother cast her vote in Kyiv in the parliamentary election on October 26. Photo courtesy Yaroslav Baran

the Orange Revolution of 2004, and again by Euromaidan in late 2013. And it is a rejection of those *Homo Sovieticus* values that continues to define Ukraine's social revolution.

Perhaps the most striking manifestation of this social change is in the energy of the youth: they are increasingly involved, interested in politics, aware of domestic and global current affairs, and expect—demand—to live on par with their peers in other European countries in opportunity, civil rights, and a corruption-free government. Democratic civil society groups are growing in number, size and sophistication. They are overwhelmingly populated by youth. And they operate with both professionalism and the vigour of the activist.

One activist explains: “I was a graduate student. I studied. I didn't know anything about politics. But the way things went last winter, it was impossible not to get involved. Decency *demanded* you get involved.”

This blossoming of civil society has extended also into the world of media. Perhaps most iconic of the new

era are the hugely successful start-ups EspressoTV and Hromadske (“community”) TV—both aggressively snatching eyeballs from established (and previously distrusted) broadcasters. Intriguingly, both channels were launched during the *Maidan* protests as Internet-based live-stream broadcasters, in full knowledge they would never be granted broadcast licenses by the authoritarian Yanukovich regime. One of the two was actually started by an Opposition MP in his own home, capitalizing on his parliamentary immunity to protect the broadcast organization from police raids.

Both news organizations are staffed by young, energetic teams—many of them former protesters. All share a common goal: providing quality coverage of events and holding the government to account. There is truly a “fourth estate” culture pervading every aspect of the operation—from the people to the topics to the tone of reportage. They are also self-funded through donations — an important innovation, given that previously, all major broadcasters were financed by “oligarchs”, or wealthy industrialists, who tended to use their editorial bias in their own political interests.

**P**olitics has also benefited from, and been enriched by, the shoots of this newly reinvigorated civil society. Multiple political parties' candidate lists were populated by *Euromaidan* activists and journalists. It's a deliberate next step of the *Maidan* movement (and something qualitatively different from the Orange Revolution): don't just *demand* change, but get in there, and effect that change from within the system—and keep your political peers honest and on the ball.

The third-place finisher in the fall parliamentary elections was a populist start-up, headed by the mayor of Lviv, Ukraine's most westerly metropolis. His party, ‘Samopomich’ (self-help) consists mainly of young

people who adhere to the philosophy that you can't wait for help—citizens need to take responsibility and take matters into their own hands. Likewise, Prime Minister Yatseniuk, after breaking off from his former Motherland party (headed by Yulia Tymoshenko), named his new party with a decidedly populist moniker: “The Popular Front.”

The effects of this new activist presence—and external vigilance—are already evident on the political scene. One of the first major acts of the Poroshenko-Yatseniuk government was passage of a “Lustration” law to provide for the removal of corrupt officials from office. Moreover, the coalition agreement emerging from this fall's parliamentary election calls for the elimination of parliamentary immunity—a constitutional holdover from Soviet times.

The country is also in the midst of a fresh wave of national awakening—of a positive patriotism that is taking root in unexpected quarters. One of these is the youth—those younger than the student activist demographic—teenagers, the age group normally unconcerned with little other than their social life. One Euromaidan activist explains her own experience: “My kid brother and all his friends used to speak Russian. It was just normal for them. They watched Russian movies, they read Russian magazines, and the language of their pop-culture just seeped into their daily interaction. They are now waking up and realizing how completely abnormal it is to forsake their own language—in which they're all fluent—for a foreign language. It used to be cool to speak Russian. Now it's cool to speak Ukrainian.”

Perhaps her characterization of her own peers captures it best: “My generation has had enough—we're tired of being a diaspora in our own country.”

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ing civic patriotism, with recent polls indicating a clear majority of ethnic Russians in Ukraine rejecting the Kremlin's irredentist overtures and saying it is Ukraine—not Russia—that safeguards their interests.

There is an overall dissolution of regionalism occurring, with massive public opinion shifts over the last year on the familiar debates of Euro-integration and NATO, or even regional support breakdown for the new president, who was elected with a plurality—if not a majority—in every part of the country. While some regional differences still exist on these existential national questions, they are no longer stark. The entire country—regardless of language and ethnicity—is moving away from the Russian neo-imperialist sphere of influence, and embracing the values and policies that Europe and democracy represent.

Perhaps Prime Minister Yatseniuk said it best, when he noted that one of Vladimir Putin's huge unintended consequences was that he unified the very country he invaded.

**G**reater unity or not, significant challenges lie ahead for Ukraine. Its economy is projected to shrink by up to nine percent over the coming year. Its currency has lost almost half its value against the dollar in the last year. The 400,000 internally displaced persons (Tatars from Crimea who know from history it ain't better under the Russians, and the many thousands who fled occupied Donetsk and Luhansk) are placing significant strain on everything from social services to rent prices in major cities. With more than 4,000 soldiers already killed in battle on the Eastern Front, there are thousands of families now without husbands, wives, fathers and mothers. Families are torn apart by war, as a government with no means struggles to treat their survivors with due respect.

And to add a dose of irony, Ukraine continues to trade with Russia—despite the occupation of Crimea and Sevastopol, the active invasion in Donetsk and Luhansk, and the incessant multi-billion-rouble information war.

This is Ukraine one year after Euromaidan. This is Ukraine 20 years after the Budapest Memorandum, through which Ukraine gave up the world's third biggest arsenal or nuclear weapons in exchange for US, UK and Russian guarantees of protection against invasion. This is Ukraine on the 200th anniversary of the birth of Shevchenko, the poet-artist-prophet who sparked Ukraine's first modern massive anti-government and self-identity social revolution—a *Euromaidan* of the 1860s.

The couple continues its stroll down the winding cobblestones of St. Andrew's Descent, arm-in-arm. They are far from the war. They are more likely to encounter a kitsch vendor than a student activist. The man stops and scribbles something little on a wall: likely a romantic etching to capture the moment—certainly not a piece of political graffiti. But the Kyiv they are in is not just any European city. It is the pulsing heart of a country that has survived a revolution, and now in the midst of metamorphosis. A revolution that had already come a decade earlier and fizzled, its metamorphosis incomplete. The remaining question is this: with the stakes so much higher and with patience now so much thinner, will the political steps be finally taken to shed Ukraine's tragic Soviet legacies, or will it still come to a Third Maidan? **P**

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