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 Yanukovych 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 touristic 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 Yanukovych, 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 Yanukovych 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.

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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 Espreso TV 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 Yanukovych 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.
A remarkable surge of Ukrainian national pride is growing among Russian-speaking Ukrainians as well, chiefly in the east and south of the country. Even among the ethnic Russian minority, there are strong signs of an emerging civic patriotism.

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treater 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? 

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