

## EuroMaidan: Context and Meanings

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Current events in Ukraine, which have already received the metaphorical tag of “Eurorevolution”, have caught everyone off guard: the Ukrainian authorities, the opposition, the European Union, the Russian Federation. This multifarious and dynamic situation surprised many observers with a realization that a sizeable part of the country’s population is formulating a demand for a new (“European”) political and social lifestyle. In the given text I try to reconstruct the chronology of some main events and propose their contextual interpretation.

The very first part of the protest took place during the night of Thursday 21 November 2013 on the Independence Square (known as the Maidan) in Kyiv. It took shape as a reaction against the refusal of the authorities to sign the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement at the Vilnius Summit of the Eastern Partnership. On Saturday 23 November, for the first time since the Orange Revolution, Kyiv saw a large gathering of up to 100 000 demonstrators under the slogan of European integration. I would say that a significant part (if not the outright majority) of those protesting in the capital that day were reacting not to the government’s declaration of putting the negotiations with the European Union on hold per se, but rather to **the style and form of the way it was announced\***. Citizens were informed about this decision post-factum, without any sort of open discussion, even though on the previous day the authorities assured everyone that the Association agreement will certainly be signed in Vilnius.

Those who congregated on the Maidan that night were not political activists, and they

had no political leaders. Rather, it was a spontaneous assembly of indignant social network users, which gathered a few hundred people at most. Initially, thousands of participants of Saturday meetings, as well as of similar EuroMaidan gatherings across Ukraine, emphasized that their demand is the signing of the EU association agreement, and that **they are not aligned with any political power whatsoever**.

It would seem that the demonstration’s depoliticization might have launched its inevitable marginalization. But at 4 a.m. on Saturday 30 November, something appalling took place on the Maidan. Under the pretence of having to prepare the square for the traditional New Year’s tree, special police force “Berkut” brutally attacked the students who were camping there. Outraged by this development, hundreds of thousands of people poured into the streets of Kyiv on Saturday. Thus, the protest turned **not only political, but also plainly anti-governmental**: idealistic calls for Euro-integration were accompanied now with demands for resignation of both the President and the Prime Minister.

The leaders of the three oppositional parliamentary factions (Arseniy Yatseniuk from Yulia Tymoshenko’s “Bat’kivschyna”, Vitaliy Klychko from “Udar”, and Oleh Tiahnybok from far-right “Svoboda”), now officially heading this protest, were totally unprepared for its scope. They were also not prepared to deal with provocations that aimed to portray scenes of violence and frighten observers, particularly external ones. The epicentre of such provocations was the storming of the Presidential Administration using a building

\* *author’s emphasis*

excavator, the subsequent beating by police of all who were nearby, and the arrest of about ten random passers-by on the charge of public incitement to violence. In practice, this led to unprecedented mass protests in Kyiv. Demonstrators occupied several municipal buildings (including the City Council headquarters) and returned to the Maidan. This time, they brought tents, barricades, and a stage.

On Tuesday 3 December the Verkhovna Rada did not gather enough votes to force the government's resignation. Neither the authorities nor the opposition, it seems, took note of advice offered by Victoria Nuland (the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs at the U.S. Department of State) and Catherine Ashton (High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy). They called for a proper roundtable and for formation of a coalition government, which could **assume a full responsibility for the unavoidably painful economic reforms**. During the visit of these VIP guests, on the night from Tuesday to Wednesday 10 December, police forces in Kyiv attempted to dislodge the demonstrators, and dismantled some of their barricades. This was streamed live online. Within a few hours, thousands of Kyiv residents gathered on the Maidan. By dawn, the police backed off. The Maidan was elated. And the protest, now fully and irreversibly, **surpassed the reaction to Euro-integration hindrances, and turned into opposition to the current political regime**. The government, meanwhile, approached all calls for political roundtables not as a potential way out of this crisis, but rather as a decorative arrangement for the West (even though on 13 December both President Victor Yanukovich and the leaders of the opposition participated in one such roundtable).

To sum up, in the words of Evgeniy

Kiselev, over the past month the authorities "made obviously wrong decisions with enviable consistency, and every such decision lifted the task of solving the crisis onto a new level of difficulty" [1]. Meanwhile, the end of December made clear that the **Maidan is a problem for the opposition as well as for the government**. The former, the opposition, keeps trying to tame the Maidan, which undoubtedly surpasses the level and scope of its political outlook. And the latter, the government, attempted to counter the Maidan with a big concert in support of the acting president on Saturday 14 December. At this event, Prime Minister Nikolai Azarov spooked the audience with declarations that the EU demands of Ukraine include legalization of same-sex marriage.

By arranging this Anti-Maidan, the authorities wanted to show that the crisis is not about people opposing the government; it's about one part of Ukraine opposing another part. Manipulations with this faulty notion was made simpler by the fact that **existent distrust of the government in the East and South of the country does not find a reflection in these regions' electoral preferences**. This is due to the fact these regions, in general, do not view the country's "national-democratic" political factions as capable of representing them, and the ruling Party of Regions can exploit votes to stop "the nationalists" from coming to power [2]. Indeed, in Ukraine, there is currently no democratic force committed to working consistently with the primarily Rus-sophone electorate in the East and South of the country.

But in no way does this situation mean that, on socio-cultural and political levels, geographically defined "two Ukraines" actually exist, one of which allegedly dreams of nothing but a "reunion" with Russia, while

the other is busy only with merging its pro-European notions with a cult of a nationalist hero Stepan Bandera. Regularly replayed in both English- and Russian-language publications around the world, the defective theory about the non-existence of Ukraine as a cultural entity – complete with prompts for a “peaceful divorce” of its two parts [3] – mistakenly describes contemporary Ukraine as an analogue of Czechoslovakia, where the Slovak part can split, in a “velvet” manner, from the Czech part. In reality, the curious phenomenon of existing diverse interpretations and definitions of “Ukrainian-ness” in the context of post-Soviet political realities – as well as co-existence and competitiveness of these different understandings – supports Rory Finlin’s important observation that “the thesis of Ukraine’s ‘weak’ national identity is not only conceptually vague but analytically useless” [4]. It is evidence of the potential of a search for new concepts and new terminology that could describe Ukraine’s social reality.

On Sunday 15 December, in advance of the million-strong people’s gathering against Ukraine’s joining the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, many worried that “a clash of the two Ukraines” will be staged there. But the publicized meeting of the Party of Regions was cancelled. As for the gathering in support of the authorities, it was declared “indefinite”, and after a few days those camping near the Verkhovna Rada were sent home. Most observers agreed that the government adopted **the tactic of ignoring the Maidan in hopes for its self-marginalization.**

On Tuesday 17 December, President Yanukovich left for a business trip to Moscow. As a result of his visit, Ukraine was promised a credit of 15 billion dollars, as well as a lowering of the cost of gas from around 400 to 268.5 dollars per thousand cubic meters. President

Putin announced that this help for his “fraternal” country came “without any kind of conditions”. Kyiv’s courtier journalist commented: “Who prevented the central banking institution of the European Union – European Bank for Reconstruction and Development – from purchasing Ukrainian bonds, say, for 15 billion euro? They’ve got no money for Ukraine? Too bad. Turns out Russia does have money for Ukraine” [5]. But soon it became clear that Moscow’s gifts were far from altruistic. They are not without an expiration date (for instance, the gas discount will be reviewed every quarter) and they are directly linked to Ukraine’s “proper” behaviour [6]. No official admission into the Customs Union was mentioned, which allowed less far-sighted observers to overlook the Kremlin’s bid for a **new model of integration, consisting of owning and controlling strategic areas of Ukraine’s economy.** (The new framework will be built on interlocking, inter-sectorial integration – in other words, on Russia’s co-ownership and co-management of the key sectors of Ukraine’s economy. [7]).

Russian money gave President Yanukovich some time to stitch up the most apparent holes in Ukraine’s budget. But it did not solve the structural problems of the country’s economy – direct results of multiple errors by the current and previous governments. It’s worth noting that Ukraine stood on the verge of bankruptcy not due to the threat of signing the EU agreement, but due to the government’s extensive leaning on the economy, as well as an unfavourable business climate, widespread corruption, and irresponsible populism of the ruling elites [8].

This short-term ability to save the status-quo through capitulating (an important ingredient of which, it seems, will be Ukraine’s loss of control over the gas transport system)

was positioned by Azarov's government as a big economic success. President Putin looked far more convincing in his role as a winner, having acquired another trophy following Snowden and Syria. But the biggest illusion of Kremlin seems to be a deep believe that, in general terms, Ukrainians and Russians are "one people" [9]. This stereotype automatically blocks official Moscow's ability to adequately access both the Maidan events and the social disposition in Ukraine in general.

At the same time, the diplomats of most countries of the European Union (it is difficult to speak about a thoughtful and coordinated EU foreign policy) either truly do not understand, or not want to understand, the Kremlin's reasoning as far as the Ukrainian question is concerned. The European negotiators did not quite comprehend President Yanukovich's position when they kept talking to him about freeing Yulia Tymoshenko<sup>1</sup>, instead of addressing his expected topics of financial assistance and guarantees of re-election in 2015. Neither did they grasp the depth of the Kremlin's interest in disrupting Ukraine's signing of the EU association agreement. As James Sherr astutely notes, for Brussels the Association agreement was an alternative for Ukraine's EU membership, but for Moscow it was the EU enlargement by other means [10].

During the traditional crowded Sunday Maidan gathering on 22 December 2013, the leaders of opposition took the stage and announced the creation of an NGO called "People's Union Maidan". This amorphous body, brought forth without any open discussion, quickly raised questions and suspicions. First of all, it was presumed that the opposition is trying to look busy despite its lack of strategy or decisiveness. The opposition was

<sup>1</sup> Yulia Tymoshenko was released 22 February, 2014

also suspected of trying to head something it did not actually create, and which surpasses it intellectually. As Yuriy Ruban accurately commented, the Maidan is looking for answers to a problem which will not be solved by any of the opposition leaders' victory in presidential elections [11]. In other words, the **Maidan is trying to formulate the need for a programme of reforms, which not does exist**, as well as the need for a new socio-political force, which also does not exist yet.

So what exactly is the Maidan? How can we explain the phenomenon of its self-organization? Which historical metaphors can describe its nature? Possibly the most popular, though far from incontestable, is the metaphor of the Zaporizhian Sich. It refers to the early modern political phenomenon of Cossack self-government, ended by Russia's absolutism at the end of the 18th century [12]. While most visitors live in tents set up in the centre of Kyiv, the crowded weekly Sunday gatherings are comprised of educated, enterprising and well-off middle-aged people who weave their hopes for change into a loosely-defined notion of Europeanization (I will return to this topic shortly). The Maidan, then, can be described as **a temporary space of non-conflicting cooperation and coexistence of people from very different social circles**. I think most of these individuals are united by their denunciation not only of the ruling authorities, but also of Ukraine's post-Soviet political and economic situation in general. Any positive aspects of this alliance are vaguer and less rationalized: they merges elements of nationalism with the mythology of Europe.

As far as nationalism is concerned, the Maidan has already legitimized nationalist slogans (such as "Glory to Ukraine – Glory to the Heroes!" [Slava Ukraïni – Herojam slava!]) and flags (such as the black-and-red flag

of the nationalist underground of World War II) as symbols of a pro-European protest [13]. The black-and-red flag was raised in place of the monument to Lenin, which was destroyed in the evening of December 8 near the Besarabsky Market. The far-right party "Svoboda" proudly claimed responsibility for this; at the same time, it curbed its usual anti-immigrant and homophobic rhetoric. As for "Glory to Ukraine!", I think we can discuss not only its legitimization, but also the transformation of meaning it underwent on the Maidan. This can be illustrated by the speech given on the Maidan by the leader of the Polish conservative party "Law and Justice" Jaroslaw Kaczynski, which ended with "Glory to Ukraine!", leading to a number of discussions in Polish right periodicals. While one writer saw it as the Polish politician's "resurrection of Galician fascism", historian and essayist Andrzej Nowak wrote that at this time, "Glory to Ukraine!" has become analogous to the slogan "Long live to Poland!" (Niech żyje Polska!) which has a broad patriotic sense [14].

As for Maidan's pro-European rhetoric, it is based on the **mythology of Europe as a space of the rule of law, social justice, freedom of movement and expression**, which was widespread in countries of the former Warsaw Pact and the Baltic nations prior to their joining the EU. This mythology of Europe far surpasses not only the content of the failed association agreement, but also the actual condition of the European Union. It does not correspond to the realities of today's Europe. But I would suggest that it is equally important to discuss the authenticity of such ideas themselves, as well as their ability to mobilize the most active portion of the population. Considering the European Union's lack of keenness for further enlargement into the post-Soviet area, we have the problem of "Europe beyond Europe" as a

new challenge for international politics. In this context, **Ukraine's ability to avoid mass violence while solving political conflicts is absolutely vital**. The country's post-Soviet history saw no parliamentary executions, no use of firearms against demonstrators, no pogroms. Both the society and the political elites so far have shown their resistance to violent scenarios, leaning towards finding peaceful solutions to all crises.

During the night of the Catholic Christmas, journalist Tetiana Chornovol was assaulted in the vicinity of Kyiv. Once again, Ukraine was pushed to escalate the conflict. It was shoved towards the use of force, leading to further isolation of the current government from the West. This mosaic, made up of slightly disoriented but still confident authorities, weak opposition, a self-assured Kremlin, a newborn civil society that has no adequate parliamentary representation, and an eternally confused and tardy European Union, can develop in most (un)expected ways. Only one thing is clear: Ukraine's economic and political crisis is not solved. And the story continues...

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