

The Contradictions of Post-Euromaidan Ukraine and the Russia Factor

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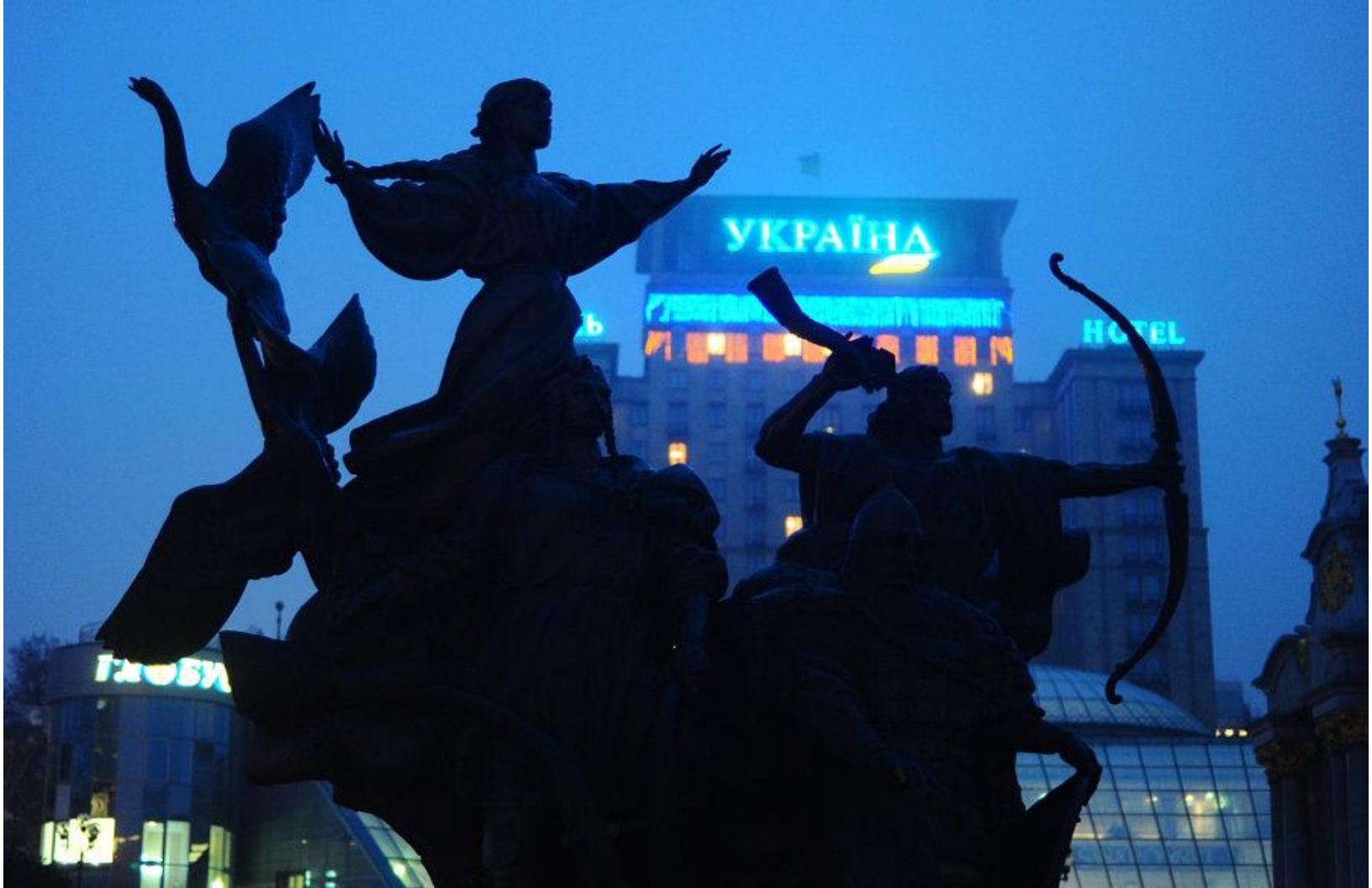
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The Kremlin's "hybrid war" on the Revolution of Dignity has been distracting pro-Western forces, in Ukraine's civil society, public administration and Western diaspora, from pushing through reforms.

By Andreas Umland

How can one explain the contradictory picture of today Ukraine – a country with a loudly announced reform agenda, yet with reformers leaving government?

On the one hand, Kyivan boasts first successes in the implementation of its "Strategy for Reforms 2020" adopted in July 2014. In this program, the Ukrainian government identified 62 national reform measures to be conducted over the coming years. And, indeed, a number of consequential laws have been promulgated: on lustration, fighting corruption, procurement, restructuring of the civil service, modernization of higher education, creation of a new police force, introducing public broadcasting, etc. Four new anti-corruption agencies are currently being established that will be exclusively engaged with combating sleaze and bribery. In formulating these laws, the government in Kyiv has worked together with Ukrainian civil society as well as international advisors, among



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them a special EU Advisory Mission and the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe.

Moreover, there are worth-mentioning reforms on the regional and local levels. Many Ukrainian districts (oblasts), cities and even villages are currently changing their public administration for the better, already before implementation of Kyiv's decentralization agenda. In some cases, the regions and communities reform in close cooperation with pro-Western forces in Kyiv. In others, local reform activists act independently from reformist moves in Kyiv. In a number of regional governments, like the Odessa Oblast Administration, the local changes are ahead or even go beyond the reforms conducted in Kyiv.

On the other hand, Ukraine is today in the midst of a political crisis triggered not by these progressive changes. On the contrary, the slow implementation and constant subversion of reforms within the central government and parliament have recently led to a deep schism in Kyiv's ruling elite. After ominous signs during preceding months, Ukraine's respected Economy Minister Aivaras Abromavicius stepped down on 3 February 2016 triggering an earthquake within the political class. Abromavicius explicitly protested against backroom deals he was asked to agree to, and brought the growing frustration of Ukraine's reformist governmental officials to the surface.

Ukraine's state thus has yet to be transformed. Not only have the post-Euromaidan promises of quick and comprehensive reforms not been fulfilled. The old kickback system and state-business networks are reasserting themselves under new disguises. Ironically, this is happening in spite of the anti-oligarchic pathos of the Revolution of Dignity of 2013-2014 and reformist agenda of the post-Euromaidan government, as well as against the background of a mobilized civil society and Western diaspora.

The standard explanation for this glaring contradiction is valid, yet incomplete: Ukraine's post-Soviet corruption networks are fighting back, old habits and structures have survived, and Kyiv's new political leadership is clearly not as transformational as the 2014 revolutionaries thought. Yet, how to explain the paradox that the reform crusaders of the Euromaidan have, so far, been unable to overcome the old oligarchic system?

Three reasons for this failure stand out:

1st– Russia's aggression against Ukraine:

Moscow's military expansion has had multi-faceted socio-economic consequences for Ukrainian society, including its capacity for radical change. Thousands of Ukrainians – among them many selfless patriots – have been killed, mutilated, wounded or/and traumatized by the war. Ukraine lost two economically important territories. The annexation of Crimea and occupation of parts of the Donets Basin has been accompanied by expropriation of production facilities, confiscation of state and corporate property, destruction of infrastructure, and transfer of Ukrainian industrial equipment as well as other valuables to Russia. Ukraine had to redirect large portions of



its already scarce financial, material and human resources from the civilian to the military sector, as well to post-war restoration.

The war and various related challenges had consequential repercussions for the activity of Ukraine's civil society and diaspora in the West. Highly mobilized by the Euromaidan, the tens of thousands of activists no longer focused their primary efforts on the rebirth of the country. Instead of reforming Ukraine, the question of the state's mere survival moved to the forefront of concern for many Ukrainian civic groups. Fighting or supporting the war against Russia – instead of transforming their motherland – became now most Ukrainian revolutionaries' mission number one. Facing a ruthless and powerful foreign enemy, consolidation of state, society and big business rather than segregation of government from oligarchs was and is Ukraine's main task of the day.

Yet, another daunting challenge was soon added – alleviation of the physical and psychological suffering experienced by the thousands of soldiers and civilians affected by the war, as well as by their families. In 2014-2015, Ukraine's civil society should have been concentrating on improving legislative projects, promoting international economic ties, uncovering corruption networks, developing education programs, identifying wasteful spending, or coming to terms with difficult historical issues. Instead, most activists, mobilized in winter 2013-14, have been engaged in work tied to the war effort, helping IDPs, restoring destroyed infrastructure, and related tasks.

2nd– An economic crisis brought about by war:

This already difficult situation was compounded by an unusually severe collapse of GDP, real incomes and the national currency, the Hryvnia, during the years 2014-15 – mainly, but not exclusively, as a result of the war. Even before Russian aggression, Ukrainians were extremely poor. But in the course of two years of a bloody war against Europe's largest military power, they have become the poorest people in Europe – even behind Albanians and Moldovans.

On top of this, there was a simultaneous rapid increase in power, gas and heating costs – a condition imposed by the International Monetary Fund for disbursement of its standby loans. To be sure, the painful measure has been overdue. Yet, this drastic macroeconomic adjustment during wartime further exacerbated the shock effect of the already severe financial and social collapse experienced by the population since the beginning of the Russian intervention. The enormous surge in communal fees has not only reduced private consumption, investment and comfort. It has also put many civic activists in more difficult economic conditions, reduced the popular support for the government's Westernization agenda, and facilitated the rise of irresponsible political populism.

3rd– Non-military instruments of Moscow's intervention:

Ukraine is and was not only the victim of a traditional armed aggression. In parallel, Russia is also conducting a non-military and multi-vector hybrid war against Ukraine



that is only partially visible to, and not fully understood in, the West. This – sometimes, purposefully covert – subversion of the Ukrainian state is being pursued through economic sanctions, secret intelligence operations, international propaganda campaigns, purposeful cyber-attacks, diplomatic interventions, political pressure, clustering of troops on the Russian-Ukrainian border, and so on.

Possibly the most important aspect of the Kremlin’s “non-linear” warfare is not its immediate effects as much as the underlying socio-psychological and politico-economic calculus. Ukrainians should be worn down by being held in a state of suspense over years – stuck between calm and tension, between war and peace, between insecurity and stability. This should especially create volatility and frustration in the Russian-speaking regions bordering Russia, as well as the Black and Azov Seas. Local entrepreneurs should be discouraged, university graduates disillusioned, civil society activists unsettled, international partners made nervous, and foreign investors scared off.

These significant new challenges for Ukrainian society altered the public and private life of most Ukrainians – including the socially more active ones – in 2014-2015. Obviously, neither the Russian armed forces’ aggression, nor the Kremlin’s other agencies’ non-military interventions in Ukraine, and their various after-effects can be excuses for the slow pace of reforms undertaken by Ukraine’s government and president. Yet, Moscow’s hybrid war against Kyiv and its multifarious economic, social and psychological effects had also important repercussions for Ukraine’s transition. In particular, it changed the “correlation of forces” in Ukrainian society’s struggle with its corrupted state administration and irrational economic structure. Had Russia respected the sovereignty, integrity and European choice of its “*brother nation*,” we would have a very different Ukraine today.

About the Author:

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