

# Lessons from Ukraine

*China should see that unbridled corruption and unwillingness to treat people with dignity can lead to popular anger and protests*

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With the new revolutionary leadership ensconced in Ukraine set to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union in the coming months, the country's move from neo-Soviet to post-Soviet state begins in earnest. European integration signals a fundamental overhaul of all aspects of Ukrainian political, legal, economic and civic life. European integration would be irreversible, signaling Ukraine's move from the geopolitical crossroads. The triumph of the Euromaidan protests has geo-strategic ramifications for European and Trans-Atlantic relations and relations between the United States, EU and Russia.

At the same time, it was always mistaken to over-focus on the Euromaidan as a geopolitical tug-of-war between the West and Russia. The drivers for Ukraine's revolution were domestic rather than foreign, and anti-Russian feelings played only a minor role. Meanwhile, the initial protest against president Viktor Yanukovich turning his back on European integration was quickly overshadowed by other important factors.

The Euromaidan was civil-society driven, rather than organized by the opposition, as was the case during the Orange Revolution a decade ago, and became a nation-wide response to rapacious greed by a small cabal of oligarchs and The Family, Yanukovich's close allies from his hometown in the Donetsk region. This was coupled by arrogance of power and disdain for the Ukrainian public that drove numerous policy mistakes during the crisis, including a machismo unwillingness to compromise and enter into dialogue and ordering police special forces and Security Service (SBU) to fire live rounds on protesters. Demands for dignity and elite accountability were the key drivers of the Euromaidan.

### Who Was Viktor Yanukovich?

Yanukovich was an anomaly, as he neither came from the Soviet nomenklatura and KGB elite or former dissident-nationalists, the two sources for all post-Soviet leaders. Donetsk, his home region, was a coal-mining backwater in Soviet Ukraine where he spent two terms in prison. During the late

1980s and 1990s, Donetsk was second to the Crimea in high numbers of murders and violence between organized crime groups with ties to different political and business groups. Rinat Akhmetov, who took power as regional powerbroker after the high-profile assassinations of crime boss Akhat Bragin and oligarch Yevhen Shcherban in 1995-1996, lobbied president Leonid Kuchma to appoint Yanukovich regional governor. He became Donetsk's regional governor in 1997 and provided political support to the unification of the Donetsk clan into the Party of Regions.

Over the following decade, as regional governor, prime minister and party leader, Yanukovich provided political protection for his tycoon allies to become fabulously wealthy. Akhmetov, who lobbied for Yanukovich to be appointed governor and stayed loyal to him to the bitter end, joined the top fifty wealthiest people in the world. According to investigative journalist Serhiy Leshchenko, Yanukovich owns half of Akhmetov's assets.

When Yanukovich was elected president in 2010 he expected tribute to be repaid in the form of a luxurious lifestyle in sumptuous and tasteless palaces that are now being publicly exposed. Neither Akhmetov nor gas tycoon Dmytro Firtash, who also gained financially from Yanukovich's four-year presidency, attempted to end the bloodshed, and their deputies in the Party of Regions voted for the anti-democratic laws on Black Thursday, or January 6. That event transformed Ukraine into a dictatorship, spurring the first round of bloodshed.

### **Outsiders**

Yanukovich and the Party of Regions were always viewed as foreign and alien in Kiev because of four factors. First, Soviet and Ukainophobic identities dominate Donetsk and Crimea, the Party of Regions two strongholds and this was reflected in the nationality and language policies they adopted under Yanukovich. As U.S. diplomatic cables from Ukraine reported, the Party of Regions was largely composed of ex-gangsters, new business tycoons and old Soviet industrial directors. At the same time, the Party of Regions integrated ideologically driven pan-Slavists, such as Vadym Kolisnichenko, coauthor of the 2012 language law elevating Russian. Kolisnichenko and the former education minister, Dmytro Tabachnyk, depicted the opposition as in Soviet and Russian propaganda as U.S.-sponsored "fascists." Needless to say, these Sovietophile and Russophile policies served to antagonize a wide cross-section of patriotic Ukrainians and led to the growth of support for nationalist such as the Svoboda (Freedom) Party.

Second, through state pressure and bribery most the Party of Regions competitors were absorbed, creating a de facto one-party state in Russophone Eastern and Southern Ukraine. The Party of Regions became a political machine winning first-place pluralities in the 2006, 2007 and 2012 parliamentary elections by using extensive election fraud.

The Party of Regions was always different to the centrist political parties it absorbed that had been created by former Komsomol (Communist Youth League) leaders who targeted the emerging middle class. In contrast, the Party of Regions is a leftist populist party with a paternalistic approach to the working class and pensioners that cooperated closely with the Communists and Crimean Russian nationalists. The destruction of political and economic pluralism in eastern-southern Ukraine in a country where business and politics are closely tied, and the monopolization of power antagonized Ukraine's non-Donetsk elites and oligarchs.

Third, the Party of Regions was authoritarian to an extent never seen before in Ukraine. This was evident in the authoritarian kleptocratic regime, and involved of opposition leaders such as Yulia Tymoshenko, the undermining of judicial independence, turning parliament into a rubber stamp body, muzzling of the media and rigging elections. The rule of law was destroyed and the resultant "bespredel" (meaning legal anarchy) led to widespread feelings of insecurity and defenseless among Ukrainians. The Investigative journalist Leshchenko wrote: "That is why Akhmetov holds responsibility for bloodshed in Ukraine and its transformation into a zone for mafia clans." Yanukovich acted as though he believed he could impose the managed democracy he had installed in Donetsk (and commonly found in Russia and other former Soviet states) throughout Ukrainian territory. In attempting this, he ignored Ukraine's regional diversity and strong civil society with its close links to Ukrainian identity that proved to be major miscalculations. It is impossible to create an authoritarian regime in regionally diverse Ukraine.

Finally, rapacious greed of a nature never before seen – even during Ukraine's highly corrupt 1990s transition to a market economy – whereby a small group of oligarchs such as Akhmetov, Firtash and The Family (which was led by the president's eldest son, Oleksandr, who joined the top fifty wealthiest Ukrainians and Serhiy Kurchenko) received the majority of lucrative state contracts. Corruption watchdog Transparency International ranked only four Central Asian states lower than Ukraine in its levels of corruption among the fifteen former Soviet republics.

These four factors provided a combustible mix for the Euromaidan protesters who vowed to protest indefinitely and put their lives on the line for change. The Orange Revolution lasted seventeen days; the Euromaidan lasted over three months. Change could only come about by electing leaders who respect their citizens and are held to account by civil society.