

Ukraine's Many Voices

An interview with Tatiana Zhurzhenko

In the run-up to Ukraine's presidential election, political scientist Tatiana Zhurzhenko reflects on the conditions for political representation in a situation of civil conflict. The present state of public opinion is difficult to assess, both inside and outside the country, while an ongoing information war fuels fears and rumours in the regions of Eastern and Southern Ukraine.

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Has the recent coverage of Ukraine by Western media given us a correct picture of the country's public opinion? Media attention has tended to focus on events in Kiev, and more recently on separatist events in the East of the country.

It is quite natural that during the Euromaidan protests, especially in the beginning, the attention of Western media focused on Kyiv – in the fight against the Yanukovych regime, it was in the capital of Ukraine that the country's future was to be decided. Small Euromaidans also emerged in some cities of Eastern Ukraine, but protests there lacked popular support. As one local journalist noted, they looked like gatherings of an ethnic diaspora in a culturally alien environment. Euromaidan activists in the East, many of them representatives of local cultural elites (such as the famous Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan in Kharkiv), relied on street performances, flash mobs and rock concerts in their attempts to mobilize the local public. Local authorities, loyal to the Party of Regions and to the person of president Yanukovych, tolerated these protests but used targeted repressions against local activists. The majority of the local population in the East observed the protests in Kyiv with resignation, mistrust and even fear. Stereotypes and clichés about “Banderivtsi” – radical nationalists from Western Ukraine threatening Russian speakers [Russophone Ukrainian citizens] in the East –, created during the Orange Revolution, were actively used by pro-government and Russian media.

As the clash between protesters and the regime became increasingly violent, violence was also exported to the regions. So-called “titushki”, criminal thugs serving local political (mafia) bosses, were used against protesters in the Eastern Ukrainian cities. They attacked peaceful protesters with sticks and stones, threatening women and elderly people in particular. Identified by the orange and black St. George’s ribbon, the newly reinvented Russian symbol of military glory, these pro-Russian attackers were dubbed “kolorady” (referring to the potato vermin known in Ukraine as colorado beetles) by their pro-Ukrainian opponents.

When Yanukovich fled the country, tensions in Eastern and Southern Ukraine escalated, and the attention of the Western media shifted first to Crimea and then to the East of Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea by Moscow created a completely new political option for the populations and local political elites of the East and South – pro-Russian separatism. Western observers are wondering where all these separatists suddenly come from and if the majority of the local population in the East, especially in the rebellious Donetsk and Luhansk, is indeed pro-Russian. My answer to this question goes back to the recent history of this region, which was part of the so-called “red belt”. In the 1990s the frustrated and impoverished electorate in the industrial Donbas region overwhelmingly voted for the communists. Later, the “machine politics” of the Party of Regions managed to harvest these protest votes by raising issues of Russian language and local identity based on nostalgic references to the Soviet past and by cultivating a specific paternalistic political culture. Many in the East did not feel “at home” in the Ukrainian state but accepted it as long as “their guys” stayed in power in Kyiv protecting them from the imagined threats of Ukrainization. The collapse of the Yanukovich regime in February 2014 let these protest voters loose, while the annexation of Crimea offered them a completely new – pro-Russian – option. Those who went to the referendum on the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic were voting first of all against the new Kyiv government, but also, for some of them, in favour of Putin’s “strong hand”.

However, the last weeks have shown that there is no such entity as the “East-South” of Ukraine, and situations in Odessa, Dnepropetrovsk, Donetsk and Kharkiv are fairly different. While in Dnepropetrovsk the local oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi supports the Kyiv government and managed to neutralize pro-Russian separatist forces, in Kharkiv the local political bosses have been balancing between Kyiv and Moscow. Even in rebellious Donbas, latest developments around the separatist “Donetsk People’s Republic” have revealed that there is only a very limited local support among the local population for a project seen to be represented by marginal radicals with Russian passports. The powerful oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, after weeks of silence, has finally taken a public stand against the pro-Russian separatism and called the leaders of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” bandits.

This does not mean however that the situation in the East is stabilized. A lot will depend on the coming presidential elections. If separatists are successful in their efforts to prevent elections on the territory of Donetsk and Luhansk, Moscow will use this to deny the legitimacy of the new president.

What are the different channels of information available to Ukrainian citizens? Can it be said that there is an information war going on between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian media?

Over the last few months, the cliché of the new Kyiv government as a “fascist junta” and the highly exaggerated threat of the Ukrainian radical nationalism (especially with reference to the radical right wing organization Pravyi Sektor which took part in the protests) have been powerful instruments for manipulating that part of the public opinion which is dependent on the Russian media. From the beginning of the Euromaidan, protesters in Kyiv were depicted as dangerous radicals and criminals, while the riot police “Berkut”, although using brutal force against the protesters, were presented as heroes and even martyrs. With the exception of the oppositional Rain TV and some independent websites Russian media represent the official position of the Kremlin, which does not acknowledge the legitimacy of the present Kyiv government. Moreover, we hear from Russian politicians and journalists that Ukraine is an artificial construct and cannot survive in its current borders, and that anybody speaking the Russian language is Russian and dreams of joining his or her homeland. This parallel virtual reality created by the Russian media has been successfully implanted in the minds of many Ukrainian citizens.

How should the Ukrainian government react? From a liberal perspective, if we put freedom of speech above all, cutting off the Russian TV channels is far from being the best solution. The Ukrainian state, however, considers itself under attack by a neighbouring state, even though it is a strange war, outsourced to paramilitary units of Russian and Ukrainian volunteers supplied with Russian weapons and money. Not by chance, one of the first objects separatists took control over were local TV towers; they immediately switched on the Russian TV channels.

The anti-Ukrainian propaganda in Russian media is part of Moscow’s warfare and the question is how to counteract it effectively. Ukraine appears to be losing this information war, partly because the Ukrainian state cannot compete with the Russian propaganda machine, in particular new instruments such as the Russia Today TV channel, created to pursue Kremlin’s information policy abroad. The Ukrainian government recently pondered whether the creation of a Ukrainian English language TV channel would be an adequate response to the Russian information attack. However, a much more important project seems to be a Russian language TV channel addressing the

Russian-speaking Ukrainians and providing them with serious information from a pro-Ukrainian perspective. Part of the problem is the structure of the media market in Ukraine, dominated by Russian companies: in other words, Ukrainians might prefer Russian TV not because they trust the news fabricated by Moscow but because they like Russian soap operas.

Can you describe the fears and rumours now rife in the regions of Eastern and Southern Ukraine?

When Viktor Yanukovich fled the country and the new government was formed, some people in the East and South were afraid of radical nationalism, of forceful Ukrainization and the ban on the public use of Russian language. Cultivated by pro-Yanukovich as well as by pro-Russian media, these fears were heated by mistakes made by the new Ukrainian government, such as an attempt to abolish the law on Russian as language officially used on the regional level. Moscow immediately used this for its propaganda, even though the acting president immediately vetoed this controversial measure. Such fears are largely irrational - everybody who ever lived in Ukraine knows that Russian speakers are not discriminated in Ukraine, quite the opposite, and that in the East and South it is the Ukrainian, not the Russian language that is marginalized in the public sphere.

With the emergence of violent scenarios in some cities such as Odessa and Mariupol people have become increasingly afraid of street violence, armed conflict or even civil war. Unlike the fear of Ukrainization, there are grounds for this, and in Slaviansk and Kramatorsk there is already a local military conflict between armed separatist groups and the Ukrainian Army. Quite understandably, local people long for peace and stability, they want to be sure that their children are safe at school and on the streets, that their relatives are not kidnapped by criminals and that their property is not stolen. Around ten thousand refugees have moved from the East and South to other regions of Ukraine. Some journalists report that separatists are losing the support of a local population tired of uncertainty and everyday violence. At the same time, there are certainly a number of people who believe that the biggest threat comes from the Ukrainian military and special anti-terrorist units sent to Donetsk and Luhansk regions by the Kyiv government. Rumours - confirmed or not - that the government is arming right-wing Ukrainian nationalists and deploying them against separatists in the East does not help to reduce such fears.

I do believe, however, that a legitimately elected president can fill the power vacuum caused by Yanukovich's flight, restore the rule of law and pacify popular fears.

Given the current situation, can the forthcoming elections achieve fair political representation?

The current presidential elections are unusual for Ukraine as they break with the traditional opposition of pro-Western vs pro-Russian candidates. Both favourites of the election race – Petro Poroshenko and Yulia Tymoshenko – promise to defend the territorial integrity of the country against Russia and see Ukraine’s future in the EU. Indeed, the annexation of Crimea and Russia’s continuing “hybrid war” in Ukraine have led to a shift of public opinion towards a pro-European choice, a fact confirmed by recent opinion polls.

For the first time in the new Ukrainian history the East has no single influential political leader. The Party of Regions’ official candidate, former Kharkiv governor Mykhailo Dobkin, has the lowest rating among all candidates. Both the openly pro-Russian Oleg Tzarev and the leader of the Communists Petro Simonenko, another pro-Russian candidate, have withdrawn from the election race. This does not mean, of course, that their views are not popular in the East and South of Ukraine; rather, their move indicates that Moscow could be preparing the ground for a refusal to recognize the Ukrainian elections.

It is difficult to imagine a fair political representation in a situation of civic conflict, with growing casualties on both sides. Yet before we start to complain about the voices of certain groups “not being heard” by the politicians, we should be aware that the Party of Regions did not really represent the East in the classical political sense. The major political parties in post-Soviet Ukraine did not seek to articulate public opinion, rather they worked as political machines for collecting votes needed to legitimize the power of oligarchic clans. The Party of Regions, which dominated the East and, to some extent, the South of Ukraine, was such a political machine indifferent to any particular ideology or public opinion. As my colleagues from Kharkiv University, political scientists Oleksandr Fisun and Oleksiy Krysenko, argue, Donbas in particular lacked political diversification and competition, and it was this model that the local elites tried to impose on the whole country. The former monopoly of the Party of Regions, which represented the interests of one particular oligarchic clan, prevented the emergence of political alternatives. Rather than regretting that the East is now left without a political leadership, one should welcome that political pluralism and real choice is now also available for the citizens of Eastern Ukraine.

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