

Interview

TOWARDS THE ABYSS

Your research has focussed on the transformations of the Ukrainian political field since the 2014 Maidan uprising. What type of rupture did this represent? What new forces entered the arena, and what happened to the old ones?

THE EUROMAIDAN WAS not a rupture in the sense of a social revolution. As my colleague Oleg Zhuravlev and I have written, it shared features with other post-Soviet uprisings and also with those of the Arab Spring in 2011.¹ These were not upheavals that led to fundamental social changes in the class structure—nor even in the political structure of the state. Instead they were mobilizations that helped to replace the elites, but where the new elites were actually factions of the same class. The Maidan revolutions in Ukraine—the 2014 Euromaidan was the last of the three—were similar. These are, in a sense, deficient revolutions: they create a revolutionary legitimacy that can then be hijacked by agents who are not actually representative of the interests of the revolutionary participants. The Euromaidan was captured by several agents, all of whom participated in the uprising and contributed to its success, but who were very far from representing the whole range of forces involved or the motivations that drove ordinary Ukrainians to support Euromaidan. In this sense, while responding to the post-Soviet crisis of political representation, the Euromaidan also reproduced and intensified it.

Predominant among these agents were the traditional parties of the opposition, represented by, among others, Petro Poroshenko who became President of Ukraine in 2014. These oligarchic parties were structured around a ‘big man’, on patron-client relations: lacking any

other model, they reproduced the worst features of the CPSU—heavy-handed paternalism, popular passivity—voided of its legitimating ‘modernity project’. Another smaller but very important agent was the bloc of West-facing NGOs and media organizations, which operated more like professional firms than community mobilizers, with the lion’s share of their budgets usually coming from Western donors. During the uprising, they were the people who created the image of the Euromaidan that was disseminated to international audiences; they were primarily responsible for the narrative about a democratic revolution that represented the civic identity and diversity of the Ukrainian people against an authoritarian government. They gained strength in relation to the weakening Ukrainian state, which was first disrupted by the uprising, then thrown into further disarray by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and by the separatist revolt in Donbas, backed by Moscow—and by Ukraine itself becoming more dependent on the West.

Then there were the far-right groups—Svoboda, Right Sector, the Azov movement—which, unlike the NGOs, were organized as political militants, with a well-articulated ideology based on radical interpretations of Ukrainian nationalism, with relatively strong local party cells and mobilizations on the streets. Thanks to the violent radicalization of Euromaidan, and then to the war in Donbas, these far-right parties were armed and could pose a violent threat to the government.² When the Ukrainian state weakened and lost its monopoly over violence, the right-wing groups entered this space. Western states and international organizations also gained increasing influence, both indirectly—through their funding of civil-society NGOs—and directly, because they provided credit and military help against Russia, as well as political support. These were the four major agents that grew stronger after the Euromaidan—the oligarchic opposition, the NGOs, the far right and Washington–Brussels.

And those who lost?

Those who lost power were, first, the sections of the Ukrainian elite—let’s call them political capitalists, in the Weberian sense: exploiting

¹ Volodymyr Ishchenko and Oleg Zhuravlev, ‘How Maidan Revolutions Reproduce and Intensify the Post-Soviet Crisis of Political Representation’, *PONARS Eurasia*, 18 October 2021.

² Volodymyr Ishchenko, ‘Insufficiently Diverse: The Problem of Nonviolent Leverage and Radicalization of Ukraine’s Maidan Uprising, 2013–14’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2020, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 201–15.

the political opportunities their offices provided for profit-seeking—organized in the Party of Regions, which backed Viktor Yanukovych. After the Euromaidan, the party collapsed. These oligarchs, as they are usually called, were politically reorganized; but they retained control over some of the crucial sectors of the Ukrainian economy, so the *Forbes* list of the richest people in Ukraine was amazingly stable. Before and after the Euromaidan revolution, the only person on the Top Ten list who made a career change was Poroshenko—a sign of how little change there was in the way the economy was working.

The other significant actor that lost out was the Communist Party of Ukraine—and the left in general. But the Communists specifically were banned in 2015, under the laws on decommunization. These were the legal grounds for suspending the activities of the CPU, and also some of the marginal communist parties. In 2012, the CPU won 13 per cent of the vote, so it was a considerable part of Ukrainian politics. In 2014, they didn't get into parliament, thanks to the loss of Crimea and the Donbas, which were their electoral strongholds. And the next year, they were suspended.

In the interview you gave NLR in 2014, you described how in the political struggles of 2004–14, the Orange parties would try to pull the constitution towards a more parliamentary setup, and the Party of Regions would pull it back to a more presidential one. What happened after 2014 to the constitutional balance, and the relative importance of parliament and president?

After 2014, they rolled back to the more parliamentary-presidential model that worked after the 'Orange revolution', and which Yanukovych cancelled in 2010 soon after he was elected the president. On the formal level, in 2014, the president was weakened and parliament was supposedly stronger. The figure of the prime minister, who was chosen by the parliamentary deputies, became more important. But what did not change was the 'neopatrimonial' regime, as it is often called in the literature of post-Soviet studies: the informal patron-client relations that dominate politics. It is quite normal to speak of clans in this regard—to say someone is in the 'clan of Poroshenko', or 'clan of Yanukovych'. These informally structured groups, whose relations are hidden from the public, have more influence on how real politics works in our country than the formal clauses of the constitution. So despite the fact that the position of the presidency was formally weakened, Poroshenko was

still the most influential politician in the country, able to push more or less what he wanted through parliament.

How did the composition of the parliament change in 2014?

There was a major change with the October 2014 parliamentary elections. Five pro-Maidan parties formed the ruling coalition—Poroshenko's party, Arseniy Yatsenyuk's People's Front, Yulia Tymoshenko's Fatherland and two others. It had a constitutional majority to begin with; but then, very quickly the coalition started to crumble. Poroshenko did not want to recognise the collapse of the coalition because that would mean having to hold new elections in which his party would perform worse than in 2014. And so, for several years, it was more like a conjunctural coalition, where his people had to manage the problem of getting majority votes.

What was Poroshenko's agenda?

When he was elected in 2014, Poroshenko wasn't seen as a representative of the radical wing of Euromaidan. But he was operating in the context of the new nexus of post-Maidan forces, in which, as I've said elsewhere, the interaction of oligarchic pluralism with a civil society that lacked institutionalized political or ideological boundaries between the West-backed NGOs and the far right, combined with the practically absent left wing, led to a process of nationalist radicalization.³ The competing oligarchs exploited nationalism in order to cover the absence of 'revolutionary' transformations after the Euromaidan, while those in nationalist-neoliberal civil society were pushing for their unpopular agendas thanks to increased leverage against the weakened state.

Poroshenko promised before the elections that he would quickly establish peace in Donbas, and some perhaps voted for him for that reason. But within a few weeks, he had made a U-turn: instead of starting the negotiations with the separatists, he intensified the Anti-Terrorist Operation against them. The idea was to try to take over Donbas militarily. That strategy was defeated by the covert intervention of the Russian Army in August 2014, and that's how the Minsk process started, first in September, and then in February 2015, after another escalation and defeat

³ Volodymyr Ishchenko, 'Nationalist Radicalization Trends in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine', *PONARS Eurasia*, Policy Memo 529, May 2018.

of the Ukrainian forces. The Minsk agreements specified a ceasefire, Ukrainian recognition of local elections in the separatist-controlled areas, the transfer of control over the border to the Ukrainian government, and a special autonomy status for Donbas within Ukraine, including the possibility of institutionalizing the separatist armed forces.

Who were the people standing up in favour of the Minsk Accords, and who was against? If this was the one chance of a peaceful settlement, why were they never implemented?

The people who were openly supportive were the opposition segment, mainly, the parties that were the successors to the Party of Regions, which were oriented towards the eastern and southern voters, particularly citizens in the Kiev-controlled parts of the Donbas, for whom the implementation of the Accords heralded the end of the war. For many other parties, Minsk was, at best, something that Russia had forcibly imposed on Ukraine. The argument was: we needed to stick with Minsk, because if Ukraine were to withdraw from the Accords, the West might lift the post-2014 sanctions against Russia. But at the same time, they were quite openly saying that they were not going to implement the political clauses of the Minsk Accords. Many argued that a politically integrated Donbas could block Kiev being able to implement a future Euro-Atlantic integration course, despite there being no mention in the Accords of such a veto. The only leverage Donbas would acquire would be the ability to blackmail Ukraine with the threat of secession, which would be easier to pull off than it had been in 2014. There was no discussion of how practically to prevent this. The Kiev government would also have had to discuss details of autonomy status with the leaders of the Donbas republics, whom they only ever referred to as ‘terrorists’ or ‘Kremlin puppets’. The general logic of the Minsk Accords demanded recognition of significantly more political diversity in Ukraine, far beyond the bounds of what was acceptable after the Euromaidan. So, Russia accused Ukraine of lacking any desire to implement the political clauses of the Accords. Ukraine accused Russia and the separatists of violating the Accords by organizing local elections themselves and by distributing Russian passports among Donbas residents. Meanwhile, the death toll in Donbas grew.

Although in the end it appeared to be Putin who put an end to the Minsk Accords by recognizing the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk

People's Republics in February 2022, there had been multiple statements from Ukrainian top officials, prominent politicians and those in professional 'civil society' saying that implementing Minsk would be a disaster for Ukraine, that Ukrainian society would never accept the 'capitulation', it would mean civil war. Another important factor was the far right, which explicitly threatened the government with violence should it try to implement the Accords. In 2015, when parliament voted on the special status for Donetsk and Lugansk, as required by Minsk, a Svoboda Party activist threw a grenade into a police line, killing four officers and injuring, I think, about a hundred. They were showing they were ready to use violence.

How much did the fighting in the Donbas dominate the politics of this whole period? In the West, it was portrayed at the time as just another frozen conflict, although the casualty figures are quite high—some 3,000 civilian deaths. Was it on the TV news every evening?

It was a very important issue, of course. There was no stable ceasefire before 2020, so practically every day there were shellings or shootings, someone would be killed on the Ukrainian side or on the separatist side. Reports about casualties and shellings were regular news items. But only a minority of Ukrainians, besides Donbas residents and refugees, were directly affected by the war.

Putin claims the hard right dominated the Ukrainian forces in the Donbas.

They never dominated there, no. They were definitely a minority of the units. Some claim the Azov Battalion was one of the most combat-ready units in the National Guard; perhaps so for a period in 2014–15, but not necessarily afterwards. I haven't studied the military in the Donbas closely, so these evaluations could be wrong. But what I know for sure is that Azov was definitely special; there was nothing else like it—a unit with a political agenda, affiliated to a political party, to a paramilitary organization, to summer camps training children, starting to develop an international strategy, inviting the Western far right to come to Ukraine—'let's fight together'—creating a kind of 'Brown International'. *Die Zeit* published a major investigative article which situated Azov at the centre of the global extreme-right networks. But Azov was just one regiment. Most of the Ukrainians who were fighting in the Donbas were not in politicized units.

But there was another phenomenon. Azov was integrated into the National Guard structure under the Ministry of the Interior, headed for years by Arsen Avakov, another of the pro-Euromaidan oligarchs. There were other armed factions that originated from the Right Sector, the radical nationalist coalition that became famous during the Euromaidan, that were not integrated, but which coordinated with the Ukrainian Army—what we might call wild groups that could do things the Army command would prefer not to do. But even those groups were a small part of the Ukrainian forces fighting in Donbas.

What was the role of the deep state in this period? Did civic freedoms grow or shrink under the post-Maidan government?

One of the main narratives about the post-Euromaidan Ukraine was the rise of an inclusive civic nation, finally unifying the East and West of the country, and of a vibrant civil society pushing for democratizing reforms. Together with Oleg Zhuravlev, I have shown that the unifying trends were paralleled by polarizing trends; that the post-Euromaidan civic nationalism did not undermine but empowered ethnic nationalism; that inclusion and expansion of democracy for some meant exclusion and repression for others.⁴ In this process of redefining what ‘Ukraine’ is about politically, a large tranche of political positions supported by many Ukrainians were moved beyond the boundaries of acceptability, according to this new articulation of the Ukrainian nation. So, if before 2014, ‘pro-Russian’ meant a large political camp supporting Ukraine’s integration into Russia-led international organizations such as the Eurasian Union—or even joining the Union State with Russia and Belarus—after this camp collapsed in 2014, the ‘pro-Russian’ label was inflated and often used to stigmatize positions such as support for Ukraine’s non-aligned status and pragmatic cooperation with both West and East, as well as scepticism about Euromaidan outcomes, opposition to decommunization or restrictions on the use of the Russian language in Ukraine’s public sphere.

So, a wide range of political positions supported by a large minority, sometimes even by the majority, of Ukrainians—sovereigntist, state-developmental, illiberal, left-wing—were blended together and labelled ‘pro-Russian narratives’ because they challenged the dominant

⁴ Oleg Zhuravlev and Volodymyr Ishchenko, ‘Exclusiveness of Civic Nationalism: Euromaidan Eventful Nationalism in Ukraine’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2020, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 226–45.

pro-Western, neoliberal and nationalist discourses in Ukraine's civil society. The stigmatization was, of course, not only symbolic but could lead to online targeting campaigns, often initiated by 'patriotic' bloggers who made their public careers by identifying and harassing the 'enemies within' and which were amplified by civil society or paid Internet-bots. Occasionally, it ended in actual physical violence, usually conducted by radical-nationalist groups. In the end, it helped to legitimate sanctioning the opposition media and some politicians in 2021.

So this ideological shift principally represented a move towards a nationalist, anti-Russian agenda?

There were other groups that were also specifically targeted by the far right, like feminists, LGBT, Roma people, the left. By 2018–19, when I was still in Kiev and involved in organizing leftist media and conference projects, we were having to operate in a kind of semi-underground manner, never publishing the location of our 'public' events, with very careful preliminary checking of everyone who registered for events to see whether they might be some kind of provocateur, people from the far right who had come to disrupt the event.

What did the Poroshenko administration actually achieve?

Poroshenko had moved increasingly towards the nationalist agenda by the end of his rule. Where the post-Maidan government actually got most done was in the ideological sphere: decommunization; empowering a nationalist historical narrative; Ukrainianization; restrictions on Russian cultural products; establishing the Orthodox Church of Ukraine independent of Moscow (but subservient to the Constantinople Patriarchate). These were the planks that the Ukrainian hard right had campaigned on before the Euromaidan uprising; and although the nominal far-right politicians were not present in the post-Euromaidan governments in any significant way, this became the ruling agenda. But it would be simplistic to say that these were the positions of the far right alone, because they were legitimized within the broader bloc of national-liberal civil-society. Demands that before the Euromaidan were seen as very radical suddenly became universalized, at least on the level of what we might call the activist public, although they were often not actually supported by the majority of society.

Another issue was symbolic identification with Euro-Atlantic integration. Ukraine's 1996 Constitution affirmed the principle of non-alignment. But starting from 2014, Poroshenko and his allies pushed for a change to this, which they could achieve thanks to the constitutional majority of the pro-Maidan parties. The constitutional amendments were passed by parliament in 2018 and signed into law by Poroshenko in early 2019 as a part of his electoral campaign. So now, in a country that may never become a member of NATO, the Constitution says that the state's 'strategic course' is full membership of NATO and the EU.

Before the 2019 elections, Poroshenko also campaigned heavily on the language issue, he pushed laws that significantly restricted the use of Russian language in the public sphere and education. By the time of the elections he was indeed seen as the leader of the nationalist cause. It was not surprising that he lost so heavily with this agenda in 2019, when Zelensky won by 73 to 25 per cent.

Why would Poroshenko fight an election campaign on these issues, if they were so unpopular?

The dynamics of the deficient Euromaidan revolution could be behind this poor and puzzling choice. Poroshenko has never been an ideologically committed nationalist. He co-founded the Party of Regions and served as a minister in Yanukovich's government; there have been scandals that his family speaks Russian at home, that he continued to do business in Russia after 2014. Following Euromaidan, Poroshenko was trapped between two opposing agendas: on the one hand, increasingly popular, though disorganized and inarticulate, expectations of post-revolutionary change; on the other, unpopular yet articulate and powerful demands from national-liberal civil society. Nationalist radicalization of the ideological sphere was, for Poroshenko, an easier way of delivering some 'revolutionary' change than proceeding with reforms that would have undermined the competitive advantages of his own faction among the political capitalist class. Appeals to nationalism also served to silence 'unpatriotic' criticism and to divide the opposition. When the Rada voted to change the constitution regarding NATO and the EU, support for NATO was at about 40 per cent in Ukrainian society. So, this was not something that was pushed by the majority of voters, or that answered to a logic of 'we must do something popular before the election'. Poroshenko

was pushing projects that were popular among the activist citizens—but not the majority of voters.

Similarly with ‘decommunization’. Once the government had defined what this actually meant, polls showed that Ukrainians were not very interested in renaming the streets and cities or banning the Communist Party. At the same time, they were not ready to defend the Communist Party, because they did not see it as particularly relevant to their politics. But they were not supporters of decommunization either; they were passively against it, though not actively resisting it. The legitimacy of this agenda within the activist civil-society public was much higher than within Ukrainian society at large.

How did Ukraine’s ideological and geographical divisions evolve in the post-2014 period? What happened for example in a traditionally Russia-oriented city like Kharkov?

Up until the Russian invasion, Kharkov hadn’t changed that much. The Russian invasion is now drastically changing the identities and perceptions of Ukrainians, but this is very recent. What emerged after 2014 in Kharkov, and in the larger cities of the southeast, was a somewhat stronger middle-class, civil-society layer, with an outlook much like, let’s say, western Ukrainian politics, but in contrast to—again, as I’ve explained before, this is a misleading and stigmatizing label—the ‘pro-Russian’ attitudes of the majorities in those cities. There was a disjunction between the activist citizens, who were taking part in rallies, writing for the press, blogging, Facebooking, and the people who were coming to the voting booths and electing the mayors, the local councils. The Mayor of Kharkov, Hennadiy Kernes, was shot in the back by some sniper in 2014 and seriously injured—he was in a wheelchair—but he continued to be re-elected until his death in 2020. Right after the Euromaidan he went to Russia and maybe consulted with people there. He came back and took a position loyal to Ukraine—he didn’t support the separatist revolt. He was quite popular in Kharkov and won significant support; he didn’t have any real competition. Another striking fact: according to the opinion polls, outside the western regions, pro-nationalist attitudes had a very clear correlation with affluence: the higher people’s incomes were, the more nationalist and pro-Western their views. In the western regions, there was no such correlation—nationalism had become rooted among the wide layers of society. But in the central, eastern and southern

regions, the more middle-class you were, the more nationalistic and pro-Western you were likely to be.

Would you correlate that to other sociological differences between western and eastern Ukraine?

It's a question that still needs a lot of research, because it relates not only to how Ukrainian civil society was emerging, but to post-Soviet civil societies in general. For the layers who were protesting against Lukashenko, against Putin, but were unable to mobilize the majority of their societies against the authoritarian rulers, partially it involves a class divide; but in Ukraine it also overlaps with national-identity and regional divides. In the western regions, you wouldn't see this class difference, because that kind of nationalism had been domesticated there for many decades. But in other places, Ukrainian nationalism was more of a middle-class phenomenon—which is of course very different from western European nationalism, which at present is more working-class.

How does Europeanism fit in?

In the post-Soviet countries, again, Europeanism means something different. Pro-EU people in western Europe would definitely keep a distance from the far right. But in the post-Soviet countries, this unusual mixture of nationalism, neoliberalism and pro-EU attitudes can work very well, as an ideology of the activist public.

What sort of alternative did Zelensky offer in 2019, compared to Poroshenko?

The 2019 elections were unprecedented. Ukrainian election results are usually very close: when Yanukovich won against Tymoshenko in 2010, for example, there were just three points between them: it was 49 to 46 per cent. The difference between Yushchenko and Yanukovich in 2004 was also very small, which allowed Yanukovich to steal the election—kick-starting the Orange Revolution. But by 2019, Poroshenko had huge disapproval ratings. Nearly 60 per cent of Ukrainians were saying they would never, ever vote for him. So Zelensky was able to unite a huge majority against Poroshenko; and what seemed even more hopeful was that Zelensky was winning in almost every region in Ukraine, except the three Galician regions in the west where nationalism was strongest, and where Poroshenko won. And so, there was some hope that Ukraine

might finally be united. On the left, many did have hopes that with Zelensky there would be more space to breathe. I don't regret supporting him in 2019; I still think that was the right thing to do. Whatever happened next, Zelensky's landslide alone undermined consolidation of Poroshenko's authoritarianism. It was also a huge blow to national-liberal civil society, which had rallied around Poroshenko, and felt quite disoriented when they appeared in the '25 per cent' camp of the political minority, after claiming for several years that the whole nation was united around their agenda. It also created political momentum to claim that the interests of the actual majority in Ukraine were not represented by the people speaking on behalf of the nation, which the old and new opposition parties attempted to seize.

How did the Zelensky government unfold?

After Zelensky won the presidential election in April 2019, he called snap parliamentary elections for July. It was a smart move because his Servant of the People party, which had been created from scratch, won an overall majority—again, this was unprecedented in Ukrainian post-Soviet politics—so he was able to concentrate power in the central authorities. There were discussions about whether to have snap local elections as well; mayors play an important role in Ukrainian politics, and Zelensky's party would then have complete control if he tried to take some sensitive decisions, like, for example, implementing the Minsk Accords. But having snap local elections was more difficult to justify from the legal point of view. The success of the first prisoner exchanges between Ukraine, Russia and the Donbas in September 2019 contributed to his popularity, because it seemed that Ukrainian politics might be moving in a different direction. Zelensky had over 70 per cent approval ratings and a high level of trust in the polls. There was a window of opportunity to move forward with the Minsk Accords; there were active discussions of the so-called Steinmeier Formula that would provide an algorithm on how to implement the Accords. They were able to agree a temporary ceasefire which at least lasted for a significantly longer period than earlier ones had.

Then what happened?

It very soon became clear that not only was Zelensky's party not a real party, that this populist leader never had a populist movement behind

him, but that he didn't even have a real team that was capable of proceeding with any consistent policies. His first government lasted for about half a year. He then fired his chief of staff and there was continual turnover in ministerial positions. The lack of a serious team meant that Zelensky quite quickly fell into the same trap as Poroshenko, prey to the most powerful agents in Ukrainian politics: the oligarchic clans, the radical-nationalists, liberal civil society and the Western governments, all pushing for their specific agendas, and the inflated mass expectations about radical changes after an 'electoral Maidan' that finally brought 'new faces' to the government. Within this trap, Zelensky was trying to build his own 'vertical of power', a typical informal 'chain of command' in post-Soviet politics. But he was not especially successful in that. Possibly we could analyse it as a kind of weak Bonapartism or Caesarism: an elected leader who tried to overcome these cleavages—attack the left, attack the right, attack the nationalists, attack the 'pro-Russians'—but did so quite erratically, and without consolidating his regime, ended up creating a mess and alienating many powerful figures in Ukrainian politics by the start of 2022.

Who are the people whom he has appointed to the key positions: the minister of the economy, minister of defence, foreign affairs, and so on? Do they come from his own party, or somewhere else?

His own party was created in a different way, so it was not of much use when filling ministerial positions. In the first government, there were many people from pro-Western NGOs. But Zelensky soon saw that they were not actually competent to run the Ukrainian economy. People with whom Zelensky had worked in TV—producers, actors, his personal friends—took some of the important positions. For example, the head of counter-intelligence is someone who was personally connected to Zelensky. Later he took on people who had less of a pro-Western NGO profile, but offered some basic competence in government. Sometimes they were seen as connected to the oligarchic groups—for example, the Prime Minister, Shmyhal, worked for some time for Akhmetov. It is unlikely that he was under the influence of Akhmetov; but at that moment he was seen as a sign of a 'normal' politics returning to Ukraine: we are getting rid of those incompetent guys from NGOs, and starting to get more real functionaries into the government.

Zelensky was still in the process of creating a real team, with people coming from different sources—sometimes connected to the West,

sometimes connected to himself, sometimes to oligarchic groups. By the start of the war, it was not yet clear that he had actually managed to build that ‘vertical of power’. It was beginning to look more and more of a mess; and quite dangerous. From Putin’s perspective, if Ukraine is in a mess, run by a weak and incompetent president, then isn’t this a good time to achieve his goals?

What happened to progress on the Minsk Accords?

Poroshenko and the nationalists had begun a so-called anti-capitulation campaign in 2019, protesting against implementation of the Minsk Accords, although they didn’t have much backing. According to the polls, only a quarter of Ukrainians supported it, and almost half explicitly said they didn’t. At the same time, Azov and other far-right groups were disobeying Zelensky’s orders, sabotaging the disengagement of Ukrainian and separatist forces in Donbas. Zelensky had to go to a village in Donbas and parlay with them directly, even though he is the Commander in Chief. The ‘moderate’ anti-capitulation people could use the protests of the hard right to say that implementation of the Minsk Accords would mean a civil war because Ukrainians wouldn’t accept this ‘capitulation’, and so there would be some ‘natural’ violence.

You’ve said that the hard-right groups were actually quite small, while Poroshenko had just been electorally annihilated. What else prevented Zelensky from carrying out his mandate?

The prospect of nationalist violence was real. But the question remains: why didn’t Zelensky build an internal and international coalition in support of the Minsk Accords? Explicit and active support for the full implementation of the Accords by Western governments would have been a powerful signal to pro-Western civil society. Some people would say that by 2019 the Accords were unpopular—although they did have majority support in 2015, when they were signed, and there was a hope for peace. But by 2019 people were seeing them as ineffective at changing anything in the Donbas. However, neither Poroshenko nor Zelensky had ever seriously campaigned to increase the popularity of the Accords as much as they actually campaigned for the no less controversial and unpopular land market reform or various nationalist initiatives. Finally, France and Germany were not that active in pushing Ukraine to do more

about the Accords and the Obama and Trump administrations certainly did not support the agreement as they could have.

What were the actual differences in policies between the Poroshenko and Zelensky presidencies, in retrospect? Other than the settling of political scores, would it be correct to say there was a substantial continuity between the two?

Yes, that's correct. There were expectations that Zelensky might revise the language law, to allow a greater presence of Russian in Ukraine's public sphere; that he might make real progress in implementing Minsk. Before the war, Zelensky failed in everything. Poroshenko was actually more capable of resisting some of the international institutions' demands—specifically the IMF's pressure for market prices on gas, which Ukrainian governments always tried to block because it was hugely unpopular—especially with older people, for whom the price increase would be a heavy blow, and who vote in large numbers. Zelensky also pushed through a land market reform, which has been a big question since Ukrainian independence and very unpopular; over 70 per cent of Ukrainians were against some of the clauses.

Was that the most important social and economic change that Zelensky has made, introducing land reform?

Yes, that was one of the most important, although he hedged it with restrictions, knowing it was unpopular. So at first, only Ukrainian citizens can start buying land, and then—maybe after a referendum—they might allow foreigners to buy it. But, nonetheless, he started the process, which had been stalled for thirty years. By the start of 2021, Zelensky had lost much of his popularity. The Opposition Platform—a successor to the Party of Regions and the runner-up in 2019—was ahead of the Servant of the People party in some polls.

You've said that the ceasefire in the Donbas broke down at the end of 2020. What were the key steps that followed?

There are still many puzzles about the war and how it all started. Of course, the international dimension of NATO expansion and Russian imperialism, as well as the Kremlin's shifts in response to the latest wave of post-Soviet uprisings—in Armenia (2018), Belarus (2020),

Kazakhstan (2022)—are all very important parts of the story. Putin’s conviction that Russia had a temporary military advantage over NATO in hypersonic weapons and his underestimation of Ukrainian resistance certainly contributed to the decision to start the war. One of the crucial factors was Putin’s reaction to the processes in Ukrainian domestic politics and his growing conviction that Russia wouldn’t be able to influence them—that Ukraine was irreversibly turning into what he called ‘anti-Russia’ and that there were no political means left to prevent this transformation.

One of the triggers that has been underestimated is Zelensky’s imposition of serious sanctions on the opposition, with Viktor Medvedchuk—one of the leaders of the Opposition Platform party—a principal target. Medvedchuk is an old hand in Ukrainian politics; formerly Kuchma’s chief of staff, a personal friend of Putin and a lead negotiator in the Donbas prisoner exchanges. He is typically seen as the most ‘pro-Russian’ person among the major political figures in Ukraine, although one must take into account post-Euromaidan polarization and the shift of political coordinates in Ukraine to the pro-Western and nationalist pole. He was one of the targets of US sanctions after 2014. Since the Opposition Platform was ahead of Zelensky in the polls, it looked as though the President had just attacked a political rival. The decision to start imposing sanctions—sometimes without any serious evidence against the people they were targeting—was taken by a small group, the National Security and Defence Council, which is basically about twenty people: mostly ministers, the heads of intelligence, counter-intelligence, the financial institutions like the central bank. One of them, Dmytro Razumkov, ex-speaker of the Ukrainian parliament, started to speak out about what was happening after he was voted out of office in October 2021, shortly before the US media first started to publish leaks about the imminent Russian invasion.

What did the sanctions against Medvedchuk and the others involve?

These sanctions were more restrictive than the ones the US usually imposes. A crucial difference is that Ukraine imposed sanctions on Ukrainian citizens without a court ruling. All Medvedchuk’s bank accounts were frozen and he could not use his assets. The NSDC also sanctioned Medvedchuk’s business partner Taras Kozak, the formal owner of three TV stations generally regarded as Medvedchuk’s;

that created a legal mechanism to stop those TV stations broadcasting, which was perhaps the most important political consequence of the sanctions—they had been strongly attacking Zelensky, as well as pro-Western and nationalist forces in Ukraine, typically criticizing NGO people and politicians as ‘raised by Soros’. Later Zelensky had Medvedchuk put under house arrest, when the government started a criminal case against him on charges of state treason for trading coal with the Donbas republics, a deal that Medvedchuk had in fact brokered for Poroshenko, because they needed coal for Ukraine’s economy. In this way, Zelensky was able to connect Medvedchuk and Poroshenko, who were on opposite sides of Ukrainian politics; so if you connect them, they start to discredit each other; and if Poroshenko was dealing secretly with Medvedchuk, it would look like betrayal, if not treason, to an important section of his voters.

What were Zelensky’s motives in sanctioning Medvedchuk?

It is hard to be sure about this. National-liberal civil society welcomed sanctions against Medvedchuk, whom they saw as a ‘pro-Russian fifth column’—this was a move for which they waited for many years. A more realistic explanation is that Zelensky targeted the leader of a rival party, which was rapidly gaining popularity at the end of 2020 on the back of a wave of disenchantment with Zelensky among voters in the southeastern regions, who had massively supported him in 2019 but no longer saw any substantial difference between him and Poroshenko. Another aspect, which Simon Shuster underlined in his *Time* magazine story, is that the sanctions were applied, and welcomed in striking terms by the US Embassy, shortly after Biden’s inauguration in late January 2021.⁵

A complicating factor is that Medvedchuk’s TV stations were pushing the conspiracy theory about Hunter Biden and Burisma, which had been instrumentalized by Trump to discredit Biden during the 2020 elections. The whole world could read the transcript of the famous phone call, during which Zelensky did not exactly reject Trump’s *quid pro quo* hints about starting an official Ukrainian investigation into the Burisma story, thereby throwing fuel on the fire of a scandal about Biden. Conceivably, Zelensky could have thought that blocking Medvedchuk’s TV stations would be seen as a ‘friendly gesture’ towards the new US president, an attempt to whitewash himself. We also know that Biden was in no rush

⁵ Simon Shuster, ‘The Untold Story of the Ukraine Crisis’, *Time*, 2 February 2022.

to give an official call to Zelensky after his inauguration—the fact was widely discussed in Ukrainian press at the time as a sign of possible trouble for Zelensky. However, we simply don't have any solid evidence to corroborate either explanation.

Whatever their motives, the Zelensky government then doubled down on the attack and started using sanctions much more widely—sometimes against oligarchs, often against people suspected of organized crime, but also against other opposition media. By the start of 2022, they had blocked most of the main opposition media, including one of Ukraine's most popular websites, Strana.ua, and the most popular political blogger, Anatoly Shariy, who sought asylum in the EU. Zelensky was creating a lot of enemies for himself with these erratic sanctions, which were legally quite dubious, and the Ukrainian oligarchs began to get worried. By the end of 2021, Zelensky was in conflict with Rinat Akhmetov, the richest man in Ukraine. Akhmetov started to gather popular influencers around him—well-known journalists, Razumkov, the dismissed speaker of the parliament, the dismissed powerful Minister of Interior Avakov—and it looked like the beginning of a possible coalition against Zelensky that would be able to challenge him in case of some crisis, force snap elections and come to power. Zelensky was in a fight with the 'pro-Russian' opposition, with Poroshenko—whom he tried but failed to detain in January 2022—and with Akhmetov. It didn't look good for him at all; if you create so many enemies, they might unite just to get rid of you. There were discussions about weakening the powers of the president, turning the position into a largely ceremonial role, moving towards a parliamentary republic. Before the war, the polls were not good for him, and in some he was even losing to Poroshenko. But the war changed everything—and, of course, Zelensky is now much more popular than he was. If he's able to win the war, or at least to reach some non-humiliating settlement with Putin, he may turn out to be one of the most popular political leaders that Ukraine has ever had.

How did these sanctions against Medvedchuk and others connect to the invasion?

As Shuster spelt out in his *Time* article, the sanctions against Medvedchuk in late January 2021 were followed just a few weeks later by the first signs of Russia's build-up on the Ukrainian border. Putin was able to take the exclusion of Medvedchuk from Ukrainian politics as a clear message—

‘an absolutely obvious purge of the political field’, Shuster’s informant quotes him as saying. The US Embassy in Kiev underlined it by endorsing the sanctions immediately: the NSDC took the decision on a Friday evening, and on Saturday the US Embassy tweeted something like, ‘We support Ukraine’s efforts to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity through sanctions.’ We could perhaps speculate that the move against Medvedchuk was seen by Putin as the final drop, that Ukraine would never, ever implement the Minsk Accords; that no Russia-friendly politician would ever be allowed into the governmental coalition in Ukraine; that it would never be amenable to Russian interests.

The Time magazine story describes Moscow’s rationale for the troop build-up, as a form of coercive diplomacy—the only way to get the West to negotiate over sanctions and security guarantees, according to Shuster’s anonymous Kremlin source. It doesn’t explain the invasion—nor, of course, justify it.

Of course there cannot be any acceptable justification for this war, leave alone from a progressive point of view. The war aimed to assert Russia’s Great Power status, to mark the boundaries of its ‘sphere of influence’ where Russia would be in the right—able to proceed either with changing the ‘anti-Russian’ regime, or with the partition of Ukraine, or with turning a large territory into a huge grey zone bombed into a pre-modern state. An act inevitably leading to mass casualties, massacres of civilians, disastrous destruction. The war also serves an important domestic goal for Putin. It aims to transform Russia’s politics from post-Soviet Caesarism, whose fragility has become so evident during the recent uprisings in Belarus and Kazakhstan, to a potentially more stable, consolidated, mobilizationist political regime with an imperialist-conservative ideological project, more hegemonic for some but more repressive for others. In this project, many Ukrainians would need to be forcibly ‘re-educated’ from a ‘Banderovite’ anti-Russian Ukrainian identity into a *maloros* pro-Russian Ukrainian identity.

Whatever the problems post-Euromaidan Ukraine had—and there were many: messy incompetent politics, cynical, predatory oligarchy, deepening dependency on the Western powers, neoliberal reforms instead of progressive change, nationalist-radicalization trends, narrowing space for political pluralism, intensifying repression of the opposition—these were all Ukrainian problems that Ukrainians should and could solve themselves in a political process, without Russian tanks and bombs. Virtually

no major Ukrainian politician or opinion leader welcomed the invasion, even those who had been labelled ‘pro-Russian’ for many years.

Last year, in response to questions from Russians on what Russia could do to help ‘pro-Russian’ people in Ukraine, a Ukrainian ‘pro-Russian’ opposition journalist posted something like this: ‘Leave Ukraine alone and focus on building an affluent and attractive Russia.’ The answer reflects a fundamental post-Soviet crisis of hegemony: the incapacity of the post-Soviet and specifically Russian ruling class to lead, not simply to rule over, subaltern classes and nations. Putin, like other post-Soviet Caesarist leaders, has ruled through a combination of repression, balance and passive consent legitimated by a narrative of restoring stability after the post-Soviet collapse in the 1990s. But he has not offered any attractive developmental project. Russia’s invasion should be analyzed precisely in this context: lacking sufficient soft power of attraction, the Russian ruling clique has ultimately decided to rely on the hard power of violence, starting from coercive diplomacy in the beginning of 2021, then abandoning diplomacy for military coercion in 2022.

In the build-up to the invasion, from December 2021, the Biden Administration was refusing to negotiate with Putin and instead publicizing its intelligence about Russian invasion plans and conducting megaphone diplomacy. How was that seen in Ukraine?

Until February 24, most Ukrainians didn’t believe Russia would invade. The government didn’t believe it. Zelensky thought there might be some ‘limited invasion’, but not the full-scale onslaught which actually took place. Ukrainian military analysts from a Ministry of Defence think tank produced a report saying it was extremely unlikely that Putin would attack Ukraine in 2022. Zelensky was unhappy with the Western media campaign, thinking it was intended to put pressure on him to start implementing the Minsk Accords, which he resisted; or perhaps to abandon the claim to join NATO. It turned out they were wrong, and the CIA and MI6 were right—although they have now informed the media that the signs of Putin’s final decision to start the war appeared no earlier than February.⁶ At the same time, the US and UK grossly underestimated the potential of the Ukrainian army, just as they overestimated the Russian army, which they expected to take Kiev in three or four days.

⁶ James Risen, ‘US Intelligence Says Putin Made a Last-Minute Decision to Invade Ukraine’, *The Intercept*, 11 March 2022.

Or, at least, they publicly projected such forecasts, which complemented apparent Russian miscalculation about a quick and easy victory for their ‘special operation’ in Ukraine.

So why did Washington not prevent the invasion? If they knew that an invasion was coming, why did they do nothing except leak Putin’s plans to the media? One strategy would have been to start serious negotiations with Putin, to agree that Ukraine would not become a member of NATO, because they never had any desire to invite it to join—nor do they have any desire to fight for it, as we see now. Another, opposite strategy would be to send a massive supply of weapons to Ukraine before the war started, sufficient to have changed the calculations on Putin’s side. But they didn’t do either of those things—and that looks sort of strange, and of course very tragic for Ukraine.

The relative strength of the Ukrainian military resistance has also surprised many observers. How far do you think that’s due to the professional weapons and training that came from the US, and how far to the spirit of spontaneous national self-defence?

The military resistance is definitely stronger than the Russians expected. Besides in the occupied cities, there have been significant rallies in support of Ukraine, although so far these have involved only a small minority of residents. For example, in Kherson, a city of 300,000 residents before the invasion, the rallies mobilized around 2,000–3,000 people. Some people are scared of Russian repression but some are waiting to see what will happen, how long the Russians are going to stay. Since Russian plans for the occupied territories outside of Donbas are unclear, it would be very risky to start collaborating, because when the Ukrainians come back, those people would be persecuted. This influences the calculation about collaborationism. Resistance is significant, but it is not the only thing that is happening; different Ukrainians react to the invasion in very different ways, as is typical during wars perhaps.

In the occupied cities, are the Ukrainian political administrations still in place?

The Russians are now starting to force them to collaborate or else they are replacing them. There are reports that sometimes they arrest and kidnap Ukrainian authorities who refuse. After a month of occupation, they are starting to create some of the structures of civic military

administration. They are introducing the Russian rouble as the currency in Kherson and other occupied cities in the south. They've started to pay small amounts to pensioners and public-sector employees.

Would the Zelensky government, or any Ukrainian government, accept the secession of the Donbas provinces or Crimea?

That would be a very painful compromise. If the government starts to say that it's ready to accept the annexation of Crimea, and the so-called independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk republics, there would be a huge attack on Zelensky—he is betraying the country, he has capitulated to the Russians. He would rather not say this openly, whatever is going on at the negotiating table. In a recent interview in the *Economist*, Zelensky said, interestingly, that it's more important to save Ukrainian lives than to save territory. That could be interpreted as thinking that he may be forced to go for this compromise. But they may calculate on some different development of the war—the exhaustion of Russian resources, some major defeat, or further American weapons supplies. They may be discussing various options which could be activated depending on the outcome on the battlefields.

What sort of Ukraine do you see emerging from this war?

The war is changing Ukrainian-Russian relations and Ukrainian identity. Before the war, a significant minority, perhaps 15 per cent, of Ukrainian citizens could say they felt themselves to be both Ukrainian and Russian. Now that will be much more difficult—they would be making a choice and, I think, one in favour of Ukrainian identity. The position of the Russian language and Russian culture will be even more restricted in the public sphere—and in private communication. In the case of a prolonged war that would turn Ukraine into a Syria or Afghanistan in Europe, there would be a strong likelihood that radical nationalists would begin to occupy leading positions in the resistance, with obvious political consequences. The Ukraine in which I was born, and where I lived most of my life, is lost now, forever—however this war ends.

Do you foresee any political ricochet effects against Putin in Russia?

Not right now. Support for the war in Russia is reported to be 60–70 per cent or more. There is a separate discussion about the extent to which

we can believe Russian polls, but we don't have any other systematic evidence, and it's plausible. Of course, if the casualties grow higher, if the war drags on and the full effects of the sanctions are felt more by ordinary Russians, perceptions will change—the Russian government would need to adapt. Just relying on dictatorial measures cannot work in the long run, and at some point they will need to start buying the loyalty of Russians. Their first problem is how to reorient the Russian economy away from the West. But right now, revolt is very unlikely, especially since about 200,000 of the true opposition and anti-war Russians have fled the country. The opposition in Russia is split and repressed—the Navalny movement has been crushed for now, and the Communist Party is actually backing the war. An elite coup d'état against Putin is more likely, but I doubt they would make the first move before a defeat in Ukraine. And so, in the end, it's not a revolution or a palace coup that will end the war in Ukraine, but rather the outcomes of the war that will determine whether Russia sees a revolt, a coup or the consolidation of Putinism.