

The new government of Ukraine: stabilisation, despite obstacles

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On 27 February, the Ukrainian parliament appointed Arseniy Yatsenyuk's new government, which was also supported by the Party of Regions. The tasks of consolidating the new government and restoring the smooth operation of the state have hindered the need to focus on resolving the situation in Crimea, where Russian armed forces have intervened. Protests against the new authorities in the east and south of the country have not gained much momentum, and – contrary to Russian propaganda and the fears of the wider world – took place under the banner of self-governing autonomy, and only sporadically that of separatism. Kyiv's withdrawal from the error which was the repeal of the 2012 language law should help to calm the mood in these regions. Unexpected support for the new government came from the embarrassing press conference given by Viktor Yanukovich in Rostov-on-Don, followed by his alleged request for intervention addressed to the President of Russia, a move which constitutes treason. However at the moment, the prospects for the new government and the whole of Ukraine depend mainly on defusing tensions in the confrontation in Crimea.

Appointment of new government

On 27 February in the *Verkhovna Rada* (Ukraine's parliament), a coalition was called entitled European Choice, consisting of the *Batkivshchyna*, *UDAR* and *Svoboda* parties, the newly created Economic Development (composed mainly of MPs who had left the Party of Regions) and Sovereign European Ukraine groups, as well as a group of unaffiliated deputies. It counts 250 members (the Ukrainian parliament has a total of 450 seats). The parliament then appointed a new government, headed by Arseniy Yatsenyuk. Representatives of *Batkivshchyna* and *Svoboda* are in the government (*UDAR* chose not to be included in the cabinet), as are non-partisan social activists and economic experts. The government was supported by all parliamentary factions (including the Party of Regions) apart from the Communists, with 331 votes in total.

In his legislative programme Yatsenyuk announced that his government will carry out a series of unpopular reforms, including meeting all the conditions for a loan from the IMF. The programme of the government, which although concise was written in conspicuous haste, included an announcement that increases in energy prices were being introduced, simultaneously with the introduction of compensatory mechanisms. The government has set itself the goal of introducing a huge range of legislative changes, and it seems

unrealistic that they will be implemented before the presidential elections. Yatsenyuk declared that he himself would not participate in the presidential elections. This is neither a coalition government or a government of national trust, nor a government of experts; concerns might be raised about how efficiently and consistently it will function. On one hand It includes experienced politicians, but on the other it also contains people with no administrative experience. The government will be transitional in nature, and after the presidential election we should expect it to be deeply reconstructed. On 27 February, the candidates for the new government ministries were presented on the stage at the Maidan and approved by its leadership. However, the cabinet's final composition was slightly different, and Arsen Avakov (who had been strongly criticised by the Maidan) was appointed as Minister of the Interior. This speaks for the fact that the new government does not intend to take the opinion of the Maidan into account to such an extent as it had before taking power. On the other hand, the Maidan's leaders did not protest against Yatsenyuk's departure from the arrangements concerning the composition of the government, and have not criticised the new government, while not clearly supporting it either.

The process of the new ministers taking charge of their ministries (including the replacement of deputy ministers) and undertaking the necessary reform measures has been disrupted by the unexpected developments in Crimea and other regions.

Repeal of the language law

At a special session on 28 February, the parliament repealed the 2012 act on language policy, without introducing any new regulations on this subject. The opposition had very sharply criticised this law as favouring the Russification of public life, but in the current situation its repeal was unwise at the very least. The decision received wide coverage in the Russian-speaking regions and facilitated Russia's attempts to destabilise the situation in the east and south of the country. It caused a commotion among the other national minorities and was met by unfavourable reactions from Budapest and Bucharest. This was not prevented by President Oleksandr Turchynov's refusal to sign the bill. On 4 March the parliament confirmed that the 2012 Act was still in operation, and called an extraordinary committee to draft a new law regulating language issues. Due to the lack of time, this project can only be an amendment of the current law.

Russian propaganda claimed that in recent days Ukraine has lifted a ban on the promotion of fascism and Nazism. This is a deliberate misrepresentation. It refers to one bill, enacted on 16 January in a scandalous violation of the law, which was then repealed by parliament as being illegal on procedural grounds. In addition, this law did not forbid the propaganda of Nazism, etc. in the European sense, but rather it forbade references to the tradition of struggle by Ukrainian anti-Soviet forces during World War II, and more broadly, any questioning of the official Russian version of the war's history.

The role of Viktor Yanukovich

On 28 February, Viktor Yanukovich, of whose whereabouts there had previously been no reliable information, appeared in Rostov-on-Don on the territory of the Russian Federation. During a press conference, he announced that he was still the legitimate president of

Ukraine and stated that he was ready to return to Kyiv, when the threat to his life has passed. He appealed to Russia for help in restoring constitutional order in Ukraine. At the same time, the former president stressed that Crimea must remain part of Ukraine, and that Ukraine itself must remain a unitary state. Yanukovich did not put forward any plan for his own political activities. His speech made a terrible impression, and served as the next stage in the process of his loss of legitimacy, the more so as he was unable to give a convincing answer as to why he had not appeared in Kharkov at the congress of deputies who supported the Party of Regions on 22 February (if he had given a speech at the congress, it would have provided him with an opportunity for him to remain a political player). Yanukovich has not appeared in public since then, and it is not known where he currently resides.

On 4 March, Russia's representative on the UN Security Council used Yanukovich's alleged letter to Vladimir Putin of 1 March, asking for military intervention in Ukraine, to justify the actions of his country in Crimea. It is not known whether this letter is authentic; if it is, this represents an act of high treason, and finally closes the political career of Viktor Yanukovich. From now on he is only a tool in the hands of Moscow.

Protests in the east and south of the country

At the beginning of March in Kharkov, Donetsk, Lugansk, Odessa and other towns in eastern and southern Ukraine, protests were held against the new authorities in Kyiv; attempts to overthrow the local authorities were made, forcing them to publish referendums on regional autonomy; Russian flags were raised, and so on. Groups of several thousand people participated in these actions, with the active participation of persons arriving from Russia. In Odessa and Kharkov, these actions were opposed by groups supporting the new government. In Donetsk, protesters occupied the regional government building in the absence of any action by the police. A large part of the separatist protesters raised slogans calling for eastern Ukraine to be joined to Russia, which were broadcast by the pro-government media on the one hand, and by Russian media on the other. However, claims for local autonomy prevailed; the thinking behind this is to defend the east of Ukraine from pro-Western and nationalist tendencies, which under the influence of Russophile propaganda are often identified with fascism. There were also demands for Russia to become the guarantor of internal peace in Ukraine.

The consolidation of the new authorities in Kyiv on one hand, and the intensification of Russian military action in Crimea on the other, have resulted in a weakening of the protests. Fear is rising of the division of the country, and also of war; the latter apprehension is deeply rooted in the older generation, and prevails among the opponents of pro-Western options, the Maidan and the new government. In eastern Ukraine (including Donetsk) anti-war protests (against Russian activities) were held; in Donetsk itself, several thousand people attended the protest. The protests in the east and south were the voice of society, no less than the Euromaidan demonstrations in Kyiv and the centre of the country. A significant part of the population of Ukraine does not really favour a 'Lviv-style' vision of national identity or a 'pro-EU' geopolitical orientation, and feel concern about the changes taking place in Kyiv. They are, however, much less organised and much less willing to resist authority than the residents of the centre and particularly the west of the country. The greatest potential for

these protests is in Kharkov and Odessa, cities with strong local patriotism; the weakest is in the Donetsk Basin, an area unaccustomed to participating in public life. These protesters do not have leaders, either: the people here are just as disappointed by the rule of the Party of Regions as the people of Kyiv and Lviv, so they are unwilling to listen to local politicians; Yanukovych's escape must also have significantly weakened their resolve. Had he decided to take up the fight for power, the protests would probably look very different.

The 'great absentee' from recent events is the Communist Party of Ukraine, which would have seemed to be the natural leader of the demonstrations, as a group which is strongly anti-Western and has criticised the economic and social transformations taking place in Ukraine. It seems that this party, which since its restoration in 1994 has been run by the same people, has lost the ability to take part in politics since it concluded an alliance with the Party of Regions. The absence of any other parties of the radical left at the forefront of the protests proves the effectiveness of the policy of the Party of Regions, which for many years shattered and compromised any emergence of a significant political force to the left of the CPU.

The participation in these events of Russophile organisations has been marginal, whereas that of Russian provocateurs (sometimes militias) has been greater. However, any Russophile trends are marginal (except among the oldest generation, which is already politically passive), and most of the protesters resent the changes that are taking place in the country; they want to change state policy, and not the nationality of their homeland.

The Crimean rebellion

In Simferopol on 25 and 26 February there were minor clashes between Crimean Russians, who are demanding a referendum on independence for the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC), and Crimean Tatars, who support Crimea's membership of Ukraine as well as the new authorities in Kyiv. On 27 February, the ARC's parliament overthrew the government, and created a new one under the direction of Sergei Aksionov, an activist in local Russophile organisations; a local referendum on the future of the republic was also called. After a few days it turned out that the referendum would not be on secession – as had been feared – but rather on broadening the scope of Crimea's autonomy within Ukraine. It is supposed to take place on 30 March. However, there have been some calls for it to be held in advance (despite the lack of time to prepare). It may even be cancelled, and it is certain that Kyiv will not recognise its results. The decisions of the Crimean parliament were illegal, because as far as we know, the parliament held the debate without the required quorum. In addition, in accordance with the constitutions of both Ukraine and Crimea, a change of prime minister requires the consent of the President of Ukraine; this decision would therefore have been illegal even if there had been a quorum for the vote.

28 February saw the appearance in Crimea of soldiers of the Russian Federation, who were not wearing identification badges, and pretended to be Crimean self-defence formations. This began the phase of military confrontation in Crimea, which we have described in a separate text.

In Crimea – which only joined the Ukraine in 1954, and whose inhabitants are mostly Russians, generally poorly rooted there (including a great many retired soldiers of the Soviet

Navy with their families) – support for joining the Russian Federation is significant, unlike in other regions of Ukraine. These trends have been inhibited by fear of the response to such a step by the Crimean Tatars, who represent approximately 15% of the population, and a much larger portion of the younger generation (in Crimea fears of an outbreak of terrorism are high). Among the elite there is an awareness of Crimea's dependence on Ukraine; almost all of the electricity and the vast majority of water arrives there from Ukrainian territory. On the other hand, most of the inhabitants of the peninsula are not only linguistically, but also culturally Russian, and the authorities in Kyiv will have to reckon with this.

Summary

The domestic political confrontation in Ukraine has come to an end, replaced by a normal political process (in which street protests also figure). Yanukovich has ceased to be of any importance; the Party of Regions, deeply demoralised and disorganised, is looking for a new identity and new leaders, The Maidan has lost its momentum and is apparently giving time to the new government (the question remains of how long that will be, though). The new government is consolidating quite fast; resistance in the regions has proved to be weak, and all the political forces are beginning to concentrate on preparations for the presidential elections. This weekend Ukraine will hold a great celebration: the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of the national poet, Taras Shevchenko. The authorities would probably like to use this occasion as an opportunity for 'reconciliation across divisions'.

However, none of the pressing issues facing Ukraine have been resolved, and the dramatic course of events in Crimea and Russia's actions towards Kyiv are distracting the central government's attention from rescuing the economy and other issues. The immediate future of Ukraine mainly depends today on when, and under what conditions, the crisis in relations with Russia and the politico-military crisis in Crimea are resolved.