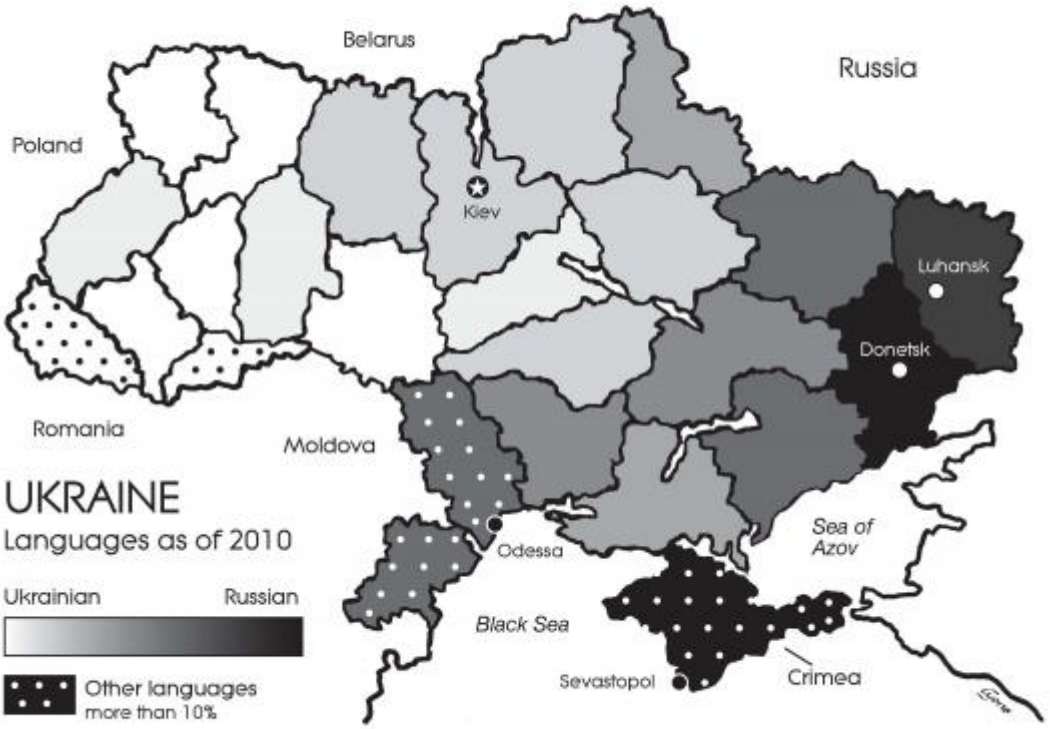
Ukraine Between a Rock and a Hard Place

written by Joanne Landy | June 25, 2014

The governments of the United States and Russia are attempting to shape events in Ukraine in their own interests, not for the benefit of the Ukrainian people. Ukrainians have long suffered from domination by Moscow, under the Russian czars and later in the Soviet Union, most horrifically under Stalin. With the end of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, millions hoped for freedom and a new beginning. However, the United States and Western Europe exploited the collapse of the Soviet system to expand their own military and economic power, extending NATO into a dozen formerly Communist nations (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Albania, and Croatia), and, they hoped, into Ukraine and Georgia as well. Equally destructive, the West attempted to use its economic heft, "shock therapy," and international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to push a brutal capitalism on the people of the former Communist countries.

In late 2013 mass protests erupted in Ukraine against the government of Viktor Yanukovych, culminating in huge demonstrations of hundreds of thousands. Despite having been elected, Yanukovych was a repressive and grotesquely corrupt ruler who lavished upon himself obscene privileges, including a vast personal compound furnished with a spa, a zoo, a large boat, a massive car collection, and a golden toilet (!), while defending the interests of the wealthy oligarchs who supported his government.

In January 2014, Yanukovych signed a series of anti-democratic laws similar to those already imposed on Russians under Vladimir Putin, which sharply limited freedom of speech and assembly. As mass protests mounted, the government sent riot police on February 18 to brutally repress the people in the streets. Two days later, riot police again fought against protesters, and the battle culminated in snipers who had taken positions on rooftops shooting at demonstrators. Some Maidan detractors have argued that the snipers were actually deployed by the opposition to create an incident that would discredit the government. The evidence for this theory is dubious; in any event, the corruption, repressiveness, and undemocratic record of the Yanukovich government are indisputable, and gave more than adequate cause for the uprising.



The Maidan was an expression of mass discontent that had been building for years, and cannot be explained away as simply the result of a false flag operation or a plot by Washington—though we know that the United States and other Western countries have worked to take advantage of popular dissatisfaction for their own purposes and will do everything they can to see that the radical democratic potential of the Maidan doesn't come to fruition. They will be helped in their efforts by the fact that the Ukrainian left and labor movements are very weak, leaving a vacuum to be filled by leaders who embrace the neoliberal austerity measures promoted by the United States and the European Union. These measures will cause bitter suffering for the masses of Maidan protesters, many of whom have been under the illusion that joining the European Union will bring them prosperity and a decent standard of living (an illusion held as well by millions in Greece and other southern European countries until bitter experience has begun to show them otherwise). In addition, though the far right forces of Svoboda and the Right Sector were only a small portion of the protesters, they played a key role in the physical defense of the Maidan against violent government attack. Today there are a number of far right figures in the temporary coalition government that was hastily constituted by parliament after Yanukovych left Kiev; it remains to be seen whether the Ukrainian people will permit these dangerous elements to remain in leading government positions.

After Yanukovych

Once in power, the new post-Yanukovych government took steps that were certain to make the country vulnerable to Russian attempts to undermine Ukraine's independence. First, parliament passed a law revoking the status of Russian—the native tongue of 30 to 40 percent of Ukrainians—as an official language in areas where Russian speakers constituted 10 percent or more of the population. This reactionary law was quickly canceled by the new acting Ukrainian president, Aleksandr Turchinov, who must have come to realize that it would set off an explosive reaction. But the damage had been done, fostering suspicion and hostility toward the new government among many Russian speakers, particularly in the eastern and southern regions of the country.

Compounding this disastrous signal about language rights, the new government declared from the outset that it would adopt the crippling economic measures demanded by the European Union and Western financial institutions. Conscious of how hugely unpopular the social cuts and privatizations the West was demanding would be, when the new prime minister, Arseny Yatseniuk (famously known familiarly as "Yats" to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland), announced his determination to carry out harsh austerity measures, he conceded, eerily, that doing so would mean that Ukraine would be led by a "suicide" government.

The Rights of Less Powerful Countries

NATO was an imperial military alliance from its inception, and with the end of the Soviet empire it lost even its retrograde Cold War rationale for existence. The Campaign for Peace and Democracy, of which I am Co-Director, and anti-war movements around the world called for NATO to dissolve after 1989 (better late than never). Instead, NATO aggressively extended its reach into the former Soviet orbit. This fact, however, does not justify Russia's interference in the domestic affairs of Ukraine: supporting a lightning referendum in Crimea under the shadow of Russian troops and operatives or declaring, as Putin has, that eastern and southern Ukraine are "Novorossiya" (or "New Russia"), signaling that Moscow would be justified in intervening, by force if necessary, to defend Russian speakers in that region. Powerful countries have no right to turn neighboring nations into "buffer states" by invoking security as a justification. When real or concocted security threats are used to justify imperialism by the United States, Russia, or any other strong military power, prospects for peace and democracy suffer a terrible blow. Ukrainians face complex and pressing problems in establishing just and democratic structures in their country, but they need to work through those problems without imperial interference from either the West or Russia. The negotiating partners should be eastern and western Ukrainians, not the United States, the European Union, or Moscow.

The Russian annexation of Crimea is to be condemned because of the intimidating way in which it was achieved (and the precedent that was thus set for future intimidation), and because of the fact that short shrift was given to considering the rights of Tatars and Ukrainian speakers, who together make up a third of Crimea's population. But there is good reason to believe that the majority of Crimeans would have freely voted to rejoin Russia in a fair referendum, and it seems doubtful that Crimea will ever return to Ukraine.

However, according to recent opinion polls conducted by the U.S.-headquartered Pew Research Center and the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, the situation in eastern and southern Ukraine seems quite different: the great majority of the population in these regions say that they are suspicious of the Kiev government and want a measure of autonomy to protect their regional interests, but wish to remain part of Ukraine. Arguably people in the east and south should have the right to secede and become independent or integrated into Russia if they so desire, but their views should be expressed in legitimate votes that will either confirm or disconfirm the opinion polls, not in hasty "referendums" conducted under pressure from unaccountable armed groups and Russian military intimidation. (To those who say that Russia hasn't intervened militarily in Ukraine, my reply is twofold: 1) there are more than likely secret Russian operatives playing a role in eastern Ukraine and, in any case 2) even if the Russian troops massed on the border with Ukraine haven't fired a shot, they are being used as a weapon to intimidate the population. Daniel Ellsberg uses a metaphor to make this point in another context: he has often said that when the U.S. threatens to use nuclear weapons, it is in fact using them, just as someone who points a gun at someone's head in the midst of a confrontation is using that gun whether or not he actually fires it.)

A peaceful resolution of the Ukrainian crisis will doubtless need to involve some kind of significantly decentralized structure for the country, though the extent of regional autonomy remains to be

negotiated in hard bargaining by the representatives of both sides. However, a huge obstacle to democratic bargaining is the presence of ultranationalist and far right elements on *both* sides.

Ultra-Nationalists and the Far Right

The far right presence in the new Kiev government has been barely mentioned in the mainstream press in the United States, but it is significant and very troubling, even if its position in a ruling coalition is subject to change in the near future. For now, the far right Svoboda Party holds important positions: Svoboda's Oleksandr Sych is deputy prime minister, the party's Ihor Shvaik is agriculture minister, and Andriy Mokhnyk is ecology minister, while former Svoboda MP Oleg Mokhnytsky runs the general prosecutor's office. (For Svoboda's stated principles, see the All-Ukrainian Union "Svoboda" program—"Program for the Protection of Ukrainians."[1]) Svoboda denies that it is fascist, and has gone to some lengths to distance its reputation from its neonazi origins and present itself as simply a right-wing nationalist party. However Svoboda's racist and fascistic coloration persists: in 2004, Svoboda leader Oleh Tyahnybok gave a speech calling for Ukrainians to fight against a "Muscovite-Jewish mafia,"[2] and celebrated the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists for having fought "Moscovites, Germans, Jews and other scum who wanted to take away our Ukrainian state."[3] In 2012 a high level Svoboda member, Yuri Sirotyuk, charged that the selection of pop star Gaitana, who was born in Ukraine to a Congolese father and Ukrainian mother, was a bad choice to represent the country in the Eurovision song contest because she was not authentically Ukrainian. "It looks like we don't want to show our face and Ukraine will be associated with a different continent, somewhere in Africa."[4] Observers disagree about whether Svoboda is properly categorized as neofascist (I believe it is), but there is no doubt that it is deeply reactionary.

[*Author's note, May 27*: This article was written before the May 25 elections. Election results indicate that, for now at least, the far right has very little popular support. As the Russian news service RT conceded about the presidential exit polls, "Ultra-right radical nationalists appeared to have completely failed in the elections, with Svoboda (Freedom) Party head Oleg Tyagnibok securing 1.17 percent of the vote and Right Sector leader Dmitry Yarosh less than one percent."5 At the time of writing this note, final voting results have not been confirmed, but they are described as approximating these very low figures. In the Kiev mayoral election, Svoboda may have fared somewhat better, though still not well: with 40 percent of the ballots counted, the party's candidate received 6.45 percent of the vote.[6]]

Although a strong case can be made that Svoboda is indeed neofascist, regardless of how one characterizes the party, Ukraine isn't today a fascist state; non-fascist neoliberal parties and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatseniuk [and, after May 25, Petro Poroshenko] lead the government and fascist measures have not been carried out. But it is an ominous sign that reactionary elements like Svoboda have been legitimized with government posts. In the absence of a successful left alternative, neoliberal austerity measures are likely to strengthen neofascist and far right forces—a dynamic we have seen in other parts of Europe, for example with the rise of Golden Dawn in Greece and the Front National in France. Recent steps taken by the new government give a foretaste of their plans: gas prices have been raised by 56 percent and it has been announced that 25,000 civil servants are to be laid off and child subsidies cut.

Ultra-nationalist and far right elements also play a significant role on the pro-Russian side. For example, as Tash Shifrin notes on her *Dream Deferred* website, "The Donbass People's Militia is led by Pavel Gubarev—a former member of fascist paramilitary organisation, Russian National Unity and of the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine, which despite its name is allied with the Eurasian Youth Union linked to influential Russian fascist Aleksandr Dugin."[7] In his article on the anarchist-leaning website *tahriricn*, Laurent Moeri reports that "there is very disturbing information about Chetniks having been invited to join Russians fighting together with the Cossack 'Wolves' (the

'Wolves' are a paramilitary organization known for their ruthlessness and have engaged in combat in Chechnya as well as in Georgia)."[8] And in April 2014, Aleksandr Ivanov-Sukharevsky, leader of the Russian neo-Nazi Peoples National Party, addressed the pro-Russian forces in South-Eastern Ukraine giving them his full support (cited, with a photo of Sukharevsky speaking; this site shows many other examples of far right elements among the pro-Russian forces[9]).

Within Russia, Vladimir Putin has used the Ukrainian conflict to foster ultra-nationalist sentiments that buttress the increasing authoritarianism of his government, which is marked by hyper-patriotism, harsh anti-protest laws, repression of journalists, vicious discrimination against gays, and an unholy alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church that we saw on display in the cruel persecution of Pussy Riot. It's no surprise, then, that Putin and the Russian government are praised by far right forces throughout Europe, including Hungary's neo-Nazi Jobbik party, the British National Party, Golden Dawn in Greece, the Italian Fronte Nazionale, and Marine Le Pen's French Front National. (Ironically, Svoboda had observer status with the ultranationalist Alliance of European National Movements until March of this year, leaving only after leaders of the Alliance endorsed the annexation of Crimea by Russia.) Inside Crimea, the repressive consequences of being brought into Moscow's orbit are illustrated by the (failed) attempt to ban this month's Tatar commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the day the mass deportation of their families began under the orders of Josef Stalin, and the cancellation of the Gay Pride parade scheduled for April 22-23 in light of the Russian law banning "gay propaganda."[10]

Much has to be done to realize the democratic promise of the Maidan uprising. For starters, the Ukrainian people need to insist that Svoboda be removed from the governing coalition, and that the Kiev government repudiate its deadly deal with the EU and the IMF. But beyond these first necessary steps, ordinary Ukrainians across the country desperately need to create a democratic left movement, with member-controlled unions[11] and political parties that can represent them. They need new radical and socialist parties that can take major enterprises out of the hands of the oligarchs who dominate western, eastern, and southern Ukraine, nationalize them, and place them under the democratic control of workers and the larger society. They need parties that can build an independent Ukraine unaligned with either NATO or Russia, outside of the German-dominated European Union and the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union, and free to develop unrestricted trade relationships with all countries.

Ukrainians need an international environment that nourishes rather than thwarts democracy in their country, and that's where we can help. We can express our solidarity with the Ukrainian people by demanding that Russia permanently withdraw its troops from the Ukrainian border and cease making interventionist threats, and that the West cease its escalating military presence in Europe, move to dismantle NATO, and withdraw its demands for privatization and austerity. We can call for aid without imperial strings to Ukraine and other countries in economic crisis. In supporting the Ukrainians, we are helping ourselves. After all, we all need a way out of the cruel world our masters have made.

May 20, 2014

Readers may also be interested in seeing the Campaign for Peace and Democracy's March 10, 2014 statement "Oppose NATO, Russian Intervention in Crimea, and the IMF."

Footnotes

1. Find Svoboda's website here.
2. David Stern, "Svoboda: The Rise of Ukraine's ultra-nationalists."

3. Cited in Per Anders Rudling, Ruth Wodak, and John E. Richardson, eds., The Return of the Ukrainian Far Right: The Case of VO Svoboda (Routledge, 2013), 229–247.
4. Maria Danilova, “Ukrainian party accused of racism in pop scandal,” Associated Press, Feb. 22, 2012.
5. “Ukrainian oligarch Poroshenko leading pres race with over 50% votes,” RT, May 25, 2014.
6. “Klitschko receives over 56 percent of votes in Kyiv mayor elections after counting in 40 percent of wards,” Kyiv Post, May 27, 2014.
7. Tash Shifrin, “Ukraine slides towards civil war: don’t choose a side in battle of reaction,” Dream Deferred, May 5, 2014.
8. Laurent Moeri, “Excuse Me Mister: How Far Is It From Simferopol To Grozny?” May 19, 2104.
9. Anton Shekhovtsov, “Russian and pro-Russian right-wing terrorists spreading fear and hate in Ukraine,” April 19, 2014.
10. See Daniel Reynolds, “Russia’s ‘Gay Propaganda’ Law Takes Effect in Crimea,” Advocate, May 1, 2014, cited by Kevin Anderson in his article in this issue, “Ukraine: Democratic Aspirations and Inter-imperialist Rivalry.”
11. Such unions are missing in Ukraine today. As Sean Larson notes in “Contradictions of the Ruling Class in Ukraine,” in this issue, “The opinion [among the public] predominates that trade unions are relics of the communist era for the purpose of organizing vacations or children’s summer camps (functions largely responsible for sustaining union membership) rather than fighting organizations pushing for the interests of workers on the job and in politics.”
Note: the map was drawn by Lisa Lyons, based on an original map at www.polgeonow.com. Source: Ukraine 2001 Census. [We regret that we omitted this note from the print issue.]