

Ukraine: A land staring into the abyss

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President Petro Poroshenko lost Ukraine's run-off election on 22 April, 2019, by a mile. He suffered the same fate as all the West's "bringers of hope" before him, since the country's independence in 1991. Volodymyr Zelenskyj, a comedian who plays an honest president in the fight against the rampant corruption in the country in a TV series, won with almost 74 percent of the votes. The election result reflects above all the disillusionment felt by all strata of Ukrainian society about the economic, political and social development of the country.

Poroshenko's decline

Poroshenko's election in 2014 was the result of the coup of February 22, 2014, led by the ultra-right Maidan movement, supported by the USA and the EU, against the then President Viktor Yanukovich. He had refused to sign a cooperation agreement with the EU that had already been negotiated. Poroshenko's subsequent election was supported by the nationalist euphoria of the Maidan movement, which promised a rosy perspective for Ukraine in alliance with the USA and the EU.

All that remains of that today is the petrified division of the country and a hopeless war in eastern Ukraine. Poroshenko was able to solve not one of the problems created or exacerbated by the nationalist Maidan movement and the West's extensive access to the country. He could neither overcome the division of the country nor create a new economic perspective for Ukraine. On the contrary, the country is now firmly in the stranglehold of the national debt to the Western states and the IMF that are financing the proxy war against Russia on credit for Ukraine and dictating the conditions as creditors.

Economic decline

The illusions in the West, which promised economic prosperity and a "decent" democracy, have burst like a bubble and without any replacement. In 2017, at \$112.5 billion, GDP was well below that of 2014, when it was \$133.5 billion. Despite the shift in industrial standards away from the Russian to the European system, investment has largely failed to materialise, while economic ties to the Russian market have been politically destroyed, with one exception: revenue from Russian oil and gas pipelines through Ukraine to Western Europe remains the largest item in the state budget. Even these will largely disappear with the completion of the new Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

Although Western investors and bankers visited the country after the Maidan and examined it for worthwhile investments, they usually left without any deals. With the exception of the fertile "black earth region" in Ukraine, which was on the list of war aims of both German Reichs but which US and EU agricultural corporations have "peacefully" "appropriated" with the power of their capital, there were very few profitable opportunities to be found. The "black earth" no longer feeds the people of Ukraine today, but produces for the world market. Economically, Ukraine has not even managed to achieve the status of an outsourced workshop of the German export industry, like Poland or Hungary. The EU membership

promised by the Western orientation has also receded into the distant future.

What does Zelenskyj stand for?

Despite his overwhelming election result, Wolodymyr Zelenskyj mainly represents himself. He has not yet presented a programme to deal with the identified evils of Ukrainian society. At the same time, voters did not demand such a programme from him during the election campaign. The illusions of the people were projected onto Zelenskyj, either as an act of resignation or as a settlement of accounts with Poroshenko. Zelenskyj's biggest advantage is that he does not belong to the old corrupt political elite of Ukraine. At the last major election event on 19 April, in the Kiev Olympic Stadium, in a duel with Poroshenko, he merely made it clear that he intended to maintain his ties with the West, to put the criminal oligarchies behind bars as well as the corrupt senior prosecutor's office and the police and military leaders. He also wants to talk to Putin about ending the war in the East and the Crimea, and he intends to hold referendums on all major issues. That seems to be his whole programme.

In fact, he does not even have a political base in the Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, because his party "Sluga Naroda", Servant of the People, was founded only a year ago. Here, too, the question is on what political and social basis did this party constitute itself? What class interests does it express? Will it break up as soon as it hits the first serious political obstacle? Even if, as Zelenskyj prefers, national elections in the autumn mean he gets a Rada with a majority of his deputies, which seems possible, his parliamentary possibilities are very limited, like those of his predecessor Poroshenko. He remains a prisoner of the Ukrainian political system and dependence on the imperialist powers. He will hardly be able to eliminate "oligarchic capitalism" even with a 2/3 majority and referendum.

Zelenskyj presented himself as a honest bourgeois democrat, with enough courage to blaspheme about "those up there", but without any idea of a better world or the means to reach it. His kneeling at the Ukrainian national anthem in Kiev Olympic stadium suggests that his heart is beating for the national cause. As a media entrepreneur and film producer, he also belongs to the national elite and is closely associated with the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky who, under Poroshenko, was deprived of control of the oil and gas company Ukrnafta. However, he remained the owner of a media empire, including the "1plus1" channel, which broadcast Zelenskyj's "Servant of the People", the show that gave his party its name.

The main accusation against Poroshenko, as against his predecessors, was that he did not get a grip on corruption or, worse still, did not want to fight it seriously or was a slave to it himself. Every conceivable form of corruption has dominated the debate in and about Ukraine for years. While US President Trump treats the country more as a side issue, his predecessor Obama, through his Vice-President, Joe Biden, paid it considerable attention and held dozens of talks with Poroshenko in which he called for a more consistent crackdown on corruption and, in particular, the independence of the judiciary, albeit without any lasting result. This raises the question of the social causes of corruption.

Oligarch Democracy...

Corruption is generally an inevitable manifestation of capitalist competition. In Ukraine and other successor states of the Soviet Union, however, it has another social root and a different quality. It arises from the particular economic and social conditions of the emergence and development of these states towards capitalism. The transformation of industry, trade and agriculture into a capitalist mode of production meant first and foremost the abolition of collective state ownership through comprehensive privatisation. The economy of these countries consisted throughout of large enterprises, combines and farm cooperatives /Kolkhozes and was sold to functionaries of the old state, party and economic apparatus for a song.

Thus a small layer of super-rich people, the so-called oligarchs, emerged. While they had a great deal of private property and money, they did not yet have the capital and competitive machinery to compete productively on the world market. In this sense, they were not yet capitalists who could use their money productively to multiply it. With the privatisation of the formerly nationalised means of production to a small layer of "oligarchs" and the very slow development of money into capital, neither a fully developed class of capitalists nor any broadly based middle class developed.

In effect, monopolies did not arise from competition and the accumulation of capital over a longer period, but from the parasitic appropriation and plundering of former state property.

The country also lacked the social basis for a bourgeois democracy in the Western sense, with separation of powers and the rule of law and the other accessories of which their friends in the West are so proud. The task of the state is to secure these social relations with its means of power (law, justice, police, military) and to regulate the competition of the various competing capital factions through legislation and jurisdiction. In Ukraine, and in the other successor states of the Soviet Union, the state effectively became the private property of the oligarchs, who in turn had to manoeuvre between the imperialist blocs, the USA, Russia, the EU. The parliaments were and are hollow, empty structures and became easy prey for the only real masters in these countries, the oligarchs. They literally bought this democratic shell for their own interests.

This internal structure, but above all the geo-strategic struggle for Ukraine and the de facto division of the country, are the reasons why investments from the West failed to materialise, and will probably continue to fail to materialise.

Authoritarianism

At the same time, they form the basis for the fact that such countries always drive towards authoritarian and Bonapartist forms of rule. After the bloody coup of the Maidan, after years of decline, all the "respectable" forces of the country have exhausted themselves politically to such an extent that a "comedian" took the place of the oligarch.

The working class was practically broken as a political and trade union movement after the reactionary victory of the Maidan, the left was marginalised, persecuted and to a considerable extent expelled from the country.

The bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties, from fascist to semi-fascist, once again turned out to be appendages of competing oligarch factions. In addition, right-wing extremism and ultra-nationalism themselves faced the problem of not being able to keep their nationalist promises; the reconquest of the Donbass or even the Crimea. For many, the war instinct turned out to be a death wish. All that remains is the call for NATO protection and Western economic aid, for armament and investment, ultimately for greater dependence, on the one hand, and for a "negotiated solution" with Putin, on the other.

What is certain today is that Zelenskyj will rapidly become a prisoner of the oligarchic system, even if he may try to give himself a certain semblance of independence and take more or less cosmetic measures against corruption. As is often the case in such situations, he has also promised a "government of experts" that is independent of the various factions of capital. The German government, the Adenauer Foundation of the CDU, the EU and also the USA will certainly be prepared to "advise" such "experts", in their own interests, of course. In view of the struggle for spheres of influence between the major powers, Zelenskyj will certainly not be in a position to solve the fundamental problems of Ukraine.

A way out

The irony of the situation is that the only way out for Ukraine would be to smash the entire oligarchic system, expropriate the privatised companies under workers' control, cancel the debts and reorganise the economy according to a democratic plan. However, this would require not only a break with the oligarchy, but also with the market economy and independence from all imperialist powers.

Only one social force can do this: the working class. The struggle against increasing misery through capitalist crisis, oligarchic arbitrariness and IMF austerity will force them to defend their livelihoods. The establishment of democratic rights, ending the war (including recognition of the right of self-determination for Crimea and Donbass) can and must be the starting point for the reconstruction of the workers' movement, trade unions and a revolutionary workers' party in Ukraine.

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