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How Moscow Is Subverting Ukraine's Bid for Freedom

Putin would hate for Ukraine's revolution to succeed. Here's what he's doing to make sure it won't.

Москва підриває прагнення України до свободи

Путін не хоче, щоб українська революція виявилася успішною. І він зробить все можливе, щоб цьому перешкодити

Як можна пояснити суперечливу картину сучасної України – країни, чий уряд голосно заявляв про готовність провести реформи і чий реформатори зараз покидають цей самий уряд? Київ вже може похвалитися першими успіхами в реалізації масштабної програми реформ, яку він прийняв у липні 2014 року. В Україні вже було прийнято низку нових законів, в тому числі закон про люстрацію, про боротьбу з корупцією, про державні закупівлі, про реструктуризацію урядових служб, про модернізацію системи вищої освіти, про створення нових сил поліції, про введення державного телемовлення і так далі. Крім того, в Україні було створено чотири агентства по боротьбі з корупцією. Реформи проходять і на місцевому рівні. Багато областей, міст і навіть сіл займаються зміною адміністрацій – як у співпраці з Києвом, так і незалежно від нього. Але, незважаючи на всі ці ознаки прогресу, Україна досі переживає самий розпал кризи. Існує безліч свідчень того, що всередині правлячої еліти стався глибокий розкол.
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How can one explain the contradictory picture of today's Ukraine — a country whose government has loudly announced a reform agenda, yet whose reformers are currently leaving this very same government?

Kiev can boast its first successes in implementing the wide-ranging reform agenda it adopted in July 2014. A number of consequential laws have been passed: on lustration, fighting corruption, procurement, restructuring the civil service, modernizing higher education, creating a new police force, introducing public broadcasting, and so on. Four new anti-corruption agencies are being established.

Still other reforms are taking place on the local level. Many regions, cities, and even villages are changing their public administration for the better, either in cooperation with Kiev or independently. In a number of regional governments, like Odessa, the local changes even go beyond the reforms conducted in the capital.

And yet, despite these signs of progress, Ukraine is in the midst of a political crisis. There is clear evidence of a deepening schism within the ruling elite. After growing criticisms of the country's lagging reform effort by foreign and domestic observers over the preceding months, Ukraine's respected Economy Minister, Aivaras Abromavicius, stepped down on February 3, triggering an earthquake within the political class. Abromavicius made it clear that his resignation was a protest against pressure on his office by corrupt interests, and his action brought the growing frustration of the country's reformist officials out into the open.

It's not just that the promises of quick and comprehensive reforms made after the Euromaidan revolution have yet to be fulfilled. As Abromavicius made clear, the old kickback system and state-business networks are reasserting themselves under new guises. Ironically, this is happening despite the anti-oligarchic furor of the Euromaidan revolution and the stated reformist agenda of the new

government. For all their energy and activism, a mobilized civil society sector and an engaged Western diaspora have failed to thwart the resistance of the old guard.

The standard explanation for this seeming contradiction, while it contains a large degree of truth, is incomplete: Ukraine's post-Soviet corruption networks are fighting back, old habits and structures have survived, and Kiev's new political leadership is clearly not as transformational as the 2014 revolutionaries thought. But why haven't the Euromaidan's reformist crusaders been able to overcome the old oligarchic system? Three main reasons for this failure stand out — and they can all be traced to the Kremlin.

First, there is the brutal fact of Russian military aggression. Moscow's offensive in the country's South and East has not only damaged Ukraine's territorial integrity, but has also profoundly affected many other aspects of society, including its capacity for radical change. Thousands of Ukrainians — among them many selfless patriots — have been killed, mutilated, wounded, or traumatized by the fighting. The country lost two economically important territories, the Crimean peninsula and much of the Donets Basin (Donbas). Ukraine has had to redirect large portions of its already scarce financial, material, and human resources from civilian to military sectors as well to post-war restoration.

The war and various related challenges have had serious repercussions for Ukraine's civil society and its diaspora in the West. Tens of thousands of activists mobilized by the revolution could no longer concentrate their efforts on transforming the country. Instead, they had to refocus on its very survival. Rather than separating the government from the oligarch class, or demolishing the old state apparatus, the top priority was to ensure that everyone — no matter how unsavory — would stay in the fight against the Russians. For instance, in the summer of 2014, one of Ukraine's most notorious industry magnates, Ihor Kolomoyskiy, played a crucial role in keeping the Kremlin-inspired pro-Russian separatism in the Don Basin from spreading into the strategically important Dnipropetrovsk region. Little wonder that today he remains one of the country's most important power-brokers.

Even as the fighting ebbed, further daunting challenges, both for Ukraine's government and for its civil society, came to the fore. The country had to focus on alleviating the physical and psychological suffering of thousands of soldiers and civilians directly affected by the fighting, as well as figuring out how to take care of hundreds of thousands of displaced people from the affected territories.

Over the past two years, Ukraine's civil society should have been concentrating on tasks like improving legislative projects, promoting international economic ties, uncovering corruption networks, developing education programs, identifying wasteful spending, or coming to terms with difficult historical issues. Instead, most of the activists mobilized in the winter of 2013-14 have since been engaged in work tied to the war and its various repercussions on society.

The second major impediment to reform was the country's economic crisis. Mainly but not exclusively as a result of the war, Ukraine's GDP collapsed in 2014-15, taking the national currency with it. Real wages plummeted as well, by over 13 percent in 2014, and by another 10 percent in 2015.

Ukrainians have also faced sharp increases in energy costs — a condition imposed by the International Monetary Fund before it would agree to disburse its multi-billion standby loans. To be sure, these painful measures are long overdue. But this drastic macroeconomic adjustment during wartime further exacerbated the shock of the country's already severe financial and social problems.

The resulting surge in utility costs and consumer goods prices have not only reduced private consumption, investment, and comfort. They have also reduced the living standards of civic activists, reduced popular support for the government's Westernization agenda, and facilitated the rise of irresponsible political populism. As impoverished anti-corruption campaigners became preoccupied with securing the daily survival of their families, the relative freedom of action of their super-rich enemies in industry, mass media, parliament, and government accordingly increased.

Finally, Ukraine's ability to reform has been seriously damaged by Russia's general campaign of subversion. The more traditional aspects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have been accompanied by a wide gamut of unconventional "hybrid war" elements, including non-military economic, social,

psychological, political, and other measures that are only partially visible to western policymakers and publics. These include trade sanctions, secret intelligence operations, international propaganda campaigns, cyber-attacks, diplomatic skirmishes, clustering of troops on the Russian-Ukrainian border, and so on.

The aim of the latter element — the staging of large-scale army exercises and movements of ground forces — is not only to train and prepare Russian soldiers for a possible future attack on Ukraine. Of more immediate concern is the anxiety the maneuvers create within Ukraine and among its partners. Like the enormous amounts of heavy weapons with which Moscow has armed its puppet regimes in the Donbas, the army drills near the border are designed to keep everyone guessing. Could Russia's mobilized troops attack Ukraine now? Or is the Kremlin preparing an offensive operation in the future? Or is Moscow merely playing with Kiev's nerves and trying to provoke radical Ukrainian forces? Will a full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine happen soon, or later, or never?

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Kremlin's non-linear warfare is thus not its immediate effect on Ukrainian society. What may be more important are its psychological effects. Ukrainians are worn down from being held, for years, in a state of suspense — stuck between calm and tension, between war and peace, between insecurity and stability. This applies in particular to those parts of Ukraine where Russian-speakers predominate. Moscow's subversive actions aim to discourage entrepreneurs, disillusion university graduates, unsettle civil society activists, spook international partners, and scare off foreign investors.

Obviously, neither Russian aggression nor economic difficulties should excuse the Ukraine government's slow pace of reforms. Ukraine's friends should continue to press Kiev hard for cleaner government and deeper economic reform. But the West should recognize that the country's exhausted civil society and its beleaguered administration are operating in an environment of exceptional stress and myriad distractions. Western leaders and policymakers must thus maintain the pressure on Moscow to abandon its reckless hybrid war. Had Russia respected the sovereignty, integrity, and European choice of its "brother nation," we would, already today, have a very different Ukraine.