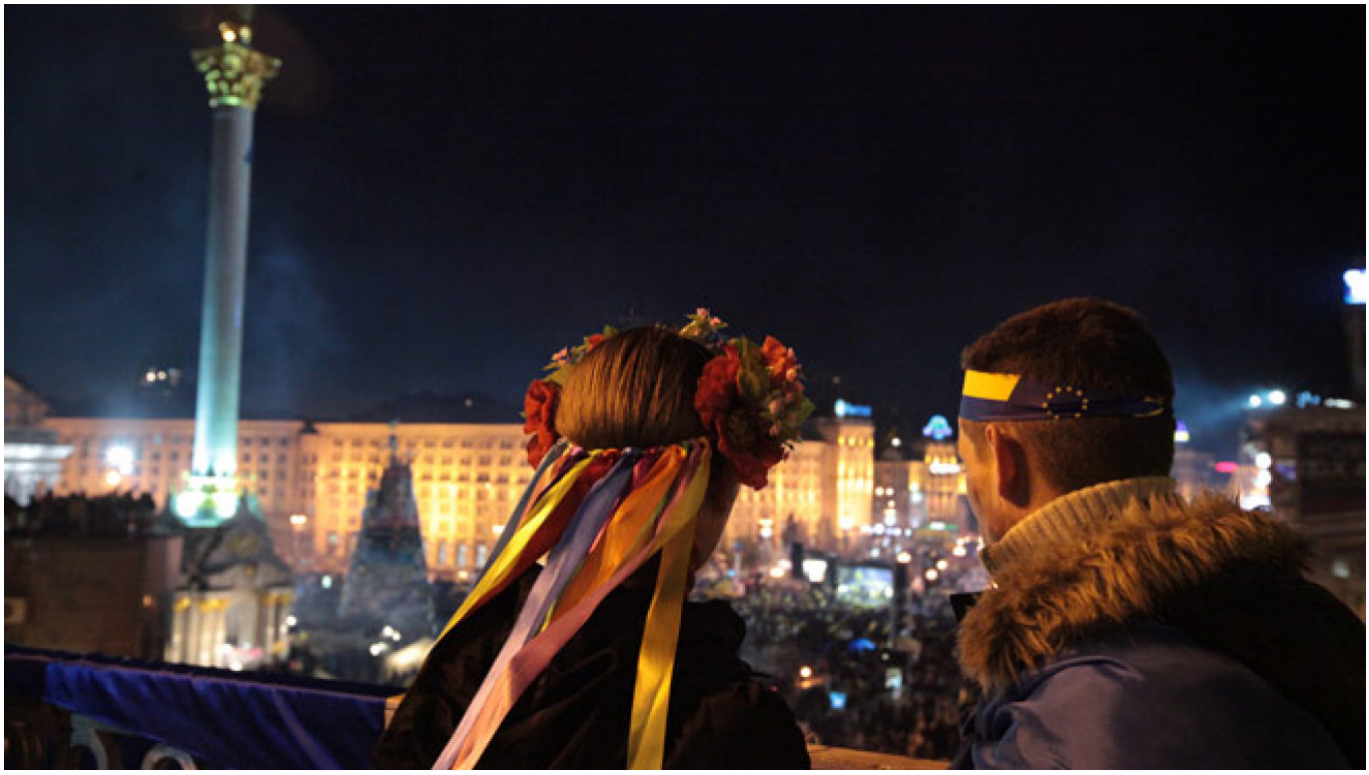
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# A Struggling Ukraine Is Bad News for Russians

By Vladislav Inozemtsev

October 20, 2015



As a Muscovite, it seemed to me in 2004 that the events unfolding in Ukraine would determine the future of Russia. The more the Kremlin dismissed the chance that Ukrainian presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko could win the elections, the more it seemed he was destined for victory. And finally, despite enormous efforts by President Vladimir Putin and his Kremlin spin doctors, the Ukrainian people had their say. After days of sit-in demonstrations at Maidan, the democratic candidate won on the third round of voting. That spawned hope that Ukraine would join the European Union within a decade and provide Russia with a model of its own future.

Nothing of the sort happened. The Ukrainian economy, which had enjoyed average annual growth of 8.3 percent in 2000-04, grew by only 1.1 percent in 2005-09. Rather than develop a strategy for freeing the country from its dependence on Russia gas and Moscow's influence, the political elite in Kiev began squabbling over who would receive the right to conduct the gas negotiations with the Kremlin and get rich in the process. In return for that gas, in 2010 Moscow negotiated the right to station its military in Crimea in perpetuity — a move that set

the stage for its later annexation.

Corruption has not declined in Ukraine since 2004. If anything, it has grown. Leaders declared their intention to integrate with Europe but did almost nothing to make that a reality. Instead, they focused primarily on domestic policy, on power moves between oligarchs and their special interests.

In practice, the call for freedom of the press became a cover for the struggle between the owners of private television channels and other media. Not surprisingly, the "democrats" lost parliamentary elections in 2006 and 2007, and the presidential election in 2010, with Yushchenko receiving just 5.5 percent of the vote.

Under his successor, former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine followed the so-called "Putin path" — at least in the sense of large-scale corruption and the privatization of state power. According to Western sources, the Yanukovych bureaucracy plundered and pocketed up to 10-12 percent of the country's gross domestic product. The lifestyles of the ruling elite became public knowledge after Yanukovych fled the country and the new leadership nationalized his personal residence and part of his property.

In 2014, the Ukrainian people once again demonstrated that they have self-respect, share European values and intend to build a better future. However, they have made very little progress along the European path in the 18 months since. Virtually nothing has been done to find the billions of dollars stolen under the previous government and even the widely advertised law on lustration has done little to push senior officials away from the "feeding trough" of government funds.

Functionaries who served under Yanukovych have begun returning to Kiev and many of the oligarchs who financed the separatists in the east have not paid in any way for their actions. It seems that the only "wildly committed" anti-corruption fighter left is former Georgian President turned Odessa region Governor Mikheil Saakashvili — who has not become too "Ukrainianized" to root out graft.

As the economy worsens, the government is busy restructuring its debt rather than recovering stolen funds, improving the investment climate or waging a real fight against bureaucracy and corruption.

Today the West is more concerned about the fate of Ukraine than it was in the mid-2000s, but only because it is the victim of a war that Russia provoked. However, that agenda has almost completely eclipsed any other. As a result, within a year or two Europe will stop hoping that Ukraine becomes a "normal" country. It will continue providing assistance out of simple inertia, but nothing more. The day is apparently not far off when "normalcy" in Ukraine will signify that corruption has become routine and the country experiences another exodus of its young and talented people.

Of course, now that Ukraine has embarked on the path of Westernization, it will doubtless continue in the same direction. The ideals expressed in 2004-05 have not faded and the victims of February 2014 will never be forgotten. More than one Maidan, more than one revolution and more than one period filled with new expectations await the country in the future. I do not worry about the future of the Ukrainian people: now that they have started

throwing off their Soviet past, they will eventually step clear of it. There is no going back. If there were, the events of 2014 would not have followed those of 2004.

Of course, the more serious problem concerns Russia. Contrary to the hopes of my friends in Kiev, Russia will not fall apart as a result of internal tensions and the economy will not collapse under the burden of funding Crimea. To the contrary, every failure in Ukraine, every delay in the fight against corruption and the struggle to reform the economy, all foot-dragging in the process of European integration plays right into the hands of Russia's most reactionary forces. They like nothing more than watching a country with a democratic leadership and European aspirations degenerate into a failed state.

And the more the Russian people equate democracy and freedom in Ukraine with economic chaos and a new batch of corrupt elites, the greater the problem becomes for the Russian state, Ukraine, Europe and, most importantly, for the Russian people.

Vladislav Inozemtsev is a fellow with the IWM in Vienna and non-resident senior associate with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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