

European interview

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# «There was no 'referendum' in Crimea, it was just a parody»

Interview with Mykola Riabchuk

## **1. How do you view recent events? Is this a continuation of the 2004 Orange Revolution? What will the main consequences of the 2014 revolution be?**

Of course there is continuity with the 2004 Revolution. Not only with the latter but also with that of 1991 which led to independence. Here I include recent events in the wider context of all post-Communist States and their bid to free themselves of Russian domination. This revolution is both anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial. Opponents wanted to rid themselves of the Soviet system as well as its remnants. In this way we might call it a "two in one". Regarding the most recent revolution we should note that the regime was more authoritarian and more corrupt. The difference was that it ended in violence. More than one hundred people were killed. In this sense the Ukrainian revolution was not gentle, resembling the Romanian situation with Ceausescu; it was more dramatic. However there are some positive points: it was a revolutionary bid inspired by civil society. It was not politicians who organised it – as in 2004 – when it became part of an electoral campaign. In this regard this revolution came as a major surprise to the politicians who did not expect it and did not know how to respond.

This was both an advantage and a disadvantage. In all events I believe there is great hope for this revolution to be successful because it has come from the people and has popular support. Some are speaking of a "Grassroots Revolution" which is the result of a development in civil society. Finally we should not ignore the serious implications this has in terms of Russia which could wipe out this development. So, whilst the two revolutions are similar they are also extremely different.

## **2. How do you interpret these events in the light of regional particularism?**

The post-Communist States have to choose their development path. Some have chosen the western path and are succeeding in reforming their society

as well as their economy in order to be able to join the European Union, some faster than others. Whilst others are not reforming or modernising. They embody a similar model to that of the former regime. Ukraine was caught at a crossroads, maybe a little like Moldova. Two countries which for various reasons have not managed to choose either path. I might explain this via the relative quality of impetus. From the beginning Ukraine had an extremely pro-western civil society. But until now it was just not strong enough to overthrow the regime and its post-Communist rules. Numerically inferior the pro-Western advocates were weaker. This was evident in the organisation of networks, financing and property. For the last twenty years we have seen civil society constantly growing in strength. I would like to remind you that in 1991 not only did Ukraine organise a referendum on independence supported by 90% of the population but also a presidential election which in reality led to a definition of the model of independence we wanted. Only one third of the electorate chose independence without the Communists, which meant that most of civil society preferred to continue on the Soviet path. Those who wanted to break from the Soviet past were then in the minority. The Ukrainians wanted the status quo for the simple reason that they had no experience in citizenship; they were the subjects in an almost semi-feudal system. They were afraid of change and preferred stability. The Orange Revolution was an attempt to break away from the past. Today we are trying again and this time I hope it will be successful. However we cannot be certain of this. The last Ukrainian revolution found wide echo amongst all post-Soviet States.

## **3. How do you think the political situation will develop in Ukraine? Is there any distinctive party? Is there a leader in the making? What place is there for the nationalist parties?**

Maidan was not organised by political parties and the latter only played a small role in the movement. It was a spontaneous movement. Maidan proved an enormous capacity for self-management. The demonstrators had to ensure their defence, food supplies, and activities.

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In this regard it was extremely impressive. In the beginning they wanted Maidan to be peaceful. It was not the demonstrators who sparked off the conflict but the government. Maidan let to violence caused directly or indirectly by those in power and by the heavily armed intervention of the police.

The question of who the real leaders are is very interesting – the Maidan demonstrators are not represented in government. Of course some are represented within the executive authorities but not strictly speaking within the government. This seems somewhat paradoxical but I believe that it was inevitable. Indeed Maidan did not represent a legitimate but a revolutionary entity. After Yanukovich's impeachment there was a general feeling of relief because he was really very corrupt. Polls have revealed that no one now really supports him. We have to make do with the existing institutions and political leaders are helping to reform these. It is clear that we could not create a government after the revolution, it would not be legitimate. And Russia is trying to discredit the temporary government. The new leaders have done a good job. They are professionals who already have government experience. Above all they are politicians whose hands are clean, above all suspicion. They do not intend to remain in office indefinitely. Neither the Prime minister nor the interim President are going to run in the presidential election. This is a positive and promising sign. Moreover I believe it necessary to organise general elections before the end of the year to get the system moving again. I hope that during the next general election Maidan will be represented.

As far as the nationalist parties are concerned the question is complicated because it is equivocal. What do we mean by "nationalist party"? All movements for national liberation comprise nationalist elements; you cannot have a national revolution without these elements. Yanukovich is no longer there and the Ukrainians are expecting elections so that they can express themselves. I think that Svoboda has little chance of entering parliament, according to a poll it would win 2%, in other words below the required threshold. Svoboda's success can find explanation in several ways. Firstly there was strong pressure under Yanukovich towards Russification. The people voted for Svoboda not because they liked them but due to

a national response. The far right in Ukraine is far from being as strong as in other countries of Europe. I believe that Svoboda will develop into a moderate party or it will disappear. Let's be realistic, Ukraine is not in the hands of fascists right now. They are there but are not playing as important a role as propaganda would lead us to think.

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#### ***4. What might the economic implications be in terms of these recent events?***

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The economic situation in Ukraine is catastrophic. The previous government stole the entire budget. Experts have calculated that 70 billion dollars were moved into offshore accounts. We cannot even find the three billion that Russia is said to have paid. Ukraine can no longer count on Russian aid, but this might be an opportunity for a new beginning. The new government has to put forward a sustainable programme in order to attract potential investors. It is a chance for us to take and modernise the economy. "Every cloud has a silver lining." Everything now depends on the Ukrainians and on the way they manage the situation. We should add that Ukrainians are used to relatively low living standards. No one is expecting a miracle. They have been trying to survive for the last 20 years. In this context it will be easy to undertake reform. For the Ukrainians the most important thing is for them to be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

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#### ***5. What do you think of the referendum result in Crimea? What are the possible consequences of Crimea's secession?***

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To start with there was no "referendum" in Crimea – it was just a parody. There are two million inhabitants in Crimea – most of them are pro-Russian. The problem is that most of the eastern part of Ukraine is resisting any form of reform from the West. The "frozen" conflict may endure. The most serious problem in Crimea is the question of minorities, and to be more specific, the Tatars. There could be ethnic crimes. The real danger also is that Russia seems to want to extend to the west and south. But Ukraine does not have enough in terms of defence. And the Russian troops deployed in Ukraine might cause many conflict.

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**6. What do you think of the EU's response, likewise that of its Member States? What should the European Union do in your opinion in terms of the crisis in Ukraine and in regard to Russia?**

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Ukraine has just signed the political chapter of the association and stabilisation agreement that Yanukovych refused to sign which triggered the revolution. It is an important step. It is the dawn of a new era.

Concerning the EU's energy policy we must not forget that there are reciprocal links between the Union and Russia. Although Europe needs Russian gas, Russia cannot survive without the revenues of its energy exports. In order to have more weight in negotiations

the EU should draw up a common energy policy and speak with one voice as it faces Russia.



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