Ukraine protests are no longer just about Europe

theguardian.com/comment sfree/2014/jan/22/ukra ne-protests-europe-far-r ght-v o ence

Vo odymyr Ishchenko   January 22, 2014

There is little doubt that Viktor Yanukovych's rule is corrupt. It stands for the interests of the richest few in Ukraine's highly unequal society and is responsible for the brutal suppression of opposition. The majority of protesting Ukrainians hope for a just, fair and democratic society, even if naively connecting this hope to an idealised "Europe".

Yet Euromaidan, Ukraine's pro-EU protest movement, has still not become a point of conflict between the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian society as a whole. According to the polls, support for Euromaidan is heavily concentrated in the western and central regions, while Ukrainians living in the east and the south of the country overwhelmingly disapprove. After mass violent clashes with the police started on Sunday, in which a leading role was played by a far-right network of groups called Right Sector, there is no doubt that people in the eastern and southern regions would condemn the protests even more. This is unfortunate because the agenda of the protest has shifted from a desire to be associated with Europe to the struggle against the police state after parliament ripped up the constitution and rushed through laws restricting, among others, the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of speech.

The Right Sector militants did not appear from nowhere, although many media and liberal protesters preferred to ignore their existence. They were active participants in the protest from the very beginning, interested not so much in European association as the "national revolution". They efficiently infiltrated the volunteer guards of the tent camps.

On 1 December, they were the main force behind the violent attack near the presidential administration, contrary to the popular version that blamed government provocateurs. When, last Sunday, Vitali Klitschko, the most probable next president of Ukraine according to the polls, tried to stop clashes with police, he was booed. Many protesters, who could not imagine themselves throwing stones and molotovs at the police line before, joined the violence of the extreme right, frustrated at the lack of progress after coming each Sunday to listen to the same talks from opposition leaders.

Yet those who may be thrilled with the illusion of an all-national revolt are forgetting that this is another step in the normalisation of the far right. Right Sector has already efficiently mainstreamed its slogans ("Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!", "Glory to the nation! Death to enemies!", "Ukraine above everything!"). We must not forget that these are people with sometimes overtly neo-Nazi ideas who would eagerly pass even more repressive laws, but only against other, ethnically defined enemies.

Several thousand people are participating in the violent clashes but, outside the two central squares and several neighbouring blocks, everyday life in Kiev is going on as usual. .

This week, though, riot police demonstrated that they can restore control over the streets in a few minutes and that they are ready to open fire against protesters   two have been killed with gunshots, as of midday on Wednesday.

What could be the alternative to this dead-end of senseless rallies without action and no less senseless violence? The negotiations that started between the opposition and some representatives of the government seem to be only an attempt to calm down the protesters. However, on Monday, students at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, one of the best universities in Ukraine, started an indefinite strike against the police state laws, aiming to stop completely teaching in their university and initiate political strikes on other campuses and workers strikes as well. If they succeed, they could show the way to a non-violent but still radical and efficient way to bring down Yanukovych's government.

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