

A Nation of Anarchists

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“We shall let no one rule our land”
—National anthem of Ukraine

The remarkable successes of self-organized Ukrainians during the turbulent 2014, which are now being discussed again, were achieved *not because of, but rather in spite of the state*, while the government apparatus and the elites were in post-revolutionary shock. The only thing Motherland gave me during my first few months in the “Aidar” volunteer battalion of the Armed Forces was a Kalashnikov light machine gun, which was so rusty that I couldn’t move the lock. I had to disassemble it and drench the parts in machine oil for two days. Only as the New Year of 2015 was approaching, we got our first official new uniforms which caught fire from the smallest spark — like the flames of revolution, according to Lenin.

Looking at the results of Ukraine’s presidential election, one can assume that during the next 5 years Ukrainians will have lots of reasons to laugh — but this laughter won’t always be a happy one. It is entirely possible we will also shed lots of tears. Apparently, these two very different emotions, laughter and grief, can both manifest as a natural reaction to such a mind-twisting stimuli as a mismatch between form and content. It is here, as the new president’s opponents believe, that is his weakest point: an actor and a clown without any political background is not fit to lead a country in such hard times. This might be true, but for me personally, what’s more worrisome is another kind of dissonance that has appeared within the past few days, immediately manifesting itself in the physical space. I’m talking about the self-proclaimed “25%” movement.

A very vocal and extremely online part of the outgoing president Poroshenko’s electorate are trying to convince their audience and themselves that the quarter of voters who voted for the incumbent are the new patriotic elite of Ukraine, surrounded by 75% of “little Russians” and unintelligent masses. Usually they ignore that at least half of those 25% voted not for the incumbent, but against Volodymyr Zelensky running for commander-in-chief. And even those who consciously supported Poroshenko (including, among others, a significant part of the Ukrainian liberal left) are unlikely to support en masse the old way of doing things. Even so, the ideologues of the new “vanguard party” believe it was these people — and no one else! — who brought down Yanukovich’s dictatorship, repelled Russian aggression, and started reshaping society in 2014, all the while pushing the country forward.

Oblivious to all-encompassing corruption and stalling reforms, they put Poroshenko on their banner and call to join ranks around him to stop a “revanche.” The most cynical (or perhaps the most sincere?) of them, even before the first round of the election, called on the government to resort to a coup, vote rigging, temporary suspension of democracy — all to prevent Poroshenko from losing power. To give credit where it’s due, he did not opt for these tactics, thus guaranteeing the overall fairest national election in modern Ukraine. And yet it looks like, that as Poroshenko lost, Ukrainian patriotic elitism was born and emerged in the political arena as a fully-shaped movement. With a broader perspective, this is far more interesting — and way more dangerous — than both Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelensky. It signals a new deep rift which can be a veritable threat to democracy in our country and also casts doubt on the very foundation of national identity.

Putting accusations of alarmism aside, it should be noted that this matter is more concerning than it might appear at first glance. The romantic relationship between Ukraine’s fifth president and his exalted groupies not only stupefies one aesthetically, but also causes a faint *deja vu*. We’ve seen this before, and this has nothing in common with Ukraine’s political tradition. Of course, it is too soon to talk about an emerging Putinism lite under blue-and-yellow flags. However, a rally to express gratitude to a national politician, while his weaknesses, corruption and hypocrisy are being willfully ignored, and calls for mindless consolidation around a powerful “Father of the Nation” during hard times are bringing us visibly closer to a markedly Russian model of relations between the authorities and society. Any further deepening of this trend of creeping reception of the aggressor’s political culture could end badly. Adopting the Russian rules of the game, Ukraine will sooner or later stoop down to a level where the enemy will easily beat us with experience.

If it is true that any nation (as a historically formed community of people living in a certain territory and producing their own culture) has its own unique worldview, then the essence of the Ukrainian national character can be described in one word: anarchism. This is supported by modern sociology: according to Iryna Bekeshkina, the director of the “Democratic initiatives” foundation, Russians are more inclined to monarchy while Ukrainians prefer anarchy — which does not preclude the latter from wishing for order, but never in exchange for liberty. This situation did not emerge in the post-Soviet era: it can be easily traced through Eastern Slavic history. Of course, such reasoning is always in large part speculative, yet if one takes a closer look to the events and phenomena we’ve learned from Ukrainian history books, it is easy to see a notable common theme. Anything specifically Ukrainian in those books is connected to protest against the government, against any kind of dictatorship, and against authoritarian or centralist aspirations.

It is no coincidence that most of the latter in Ukraine were the work of external forces. Even Pavlo Skoropadsky, the icon of Ukrainian conservatives and right-wing statists, came to power 101 years ago at the point of German bayonets — and immediately lost that power when the German revolution threatened to topple the Kaiser himself. The illustrious leader of the “Ukrainian State” did have some success in building national institutions, but at the same time he managed to fill Kyiv to the brim with fugitive Russian monarchists during the few months of his rule. His cronies were openly dismissive of those pesky Ukrainians and only escaped to this relatively calm and quiet Imperial province to sit out the turbulence in Russian capitals. On the eve of his fall, Skoropadsky pronounced a federal union with a phantom “non-Bolshevik Russia”, which was a sad yet expected final chord of “Ukrainian monarchism”. It could not end in a different way: even such a noble and educated Tsarist general as Skoropadsky could not change the nature of

the people he formally led. So, if direct external rule is the only way to shape the freedom-loving Ukrainians into a strict statist structure, then we should pay more attention to local characters of different caliber who publicly wish for a strongman ruler.

The latest person who tried to break the will of the Ukrainian people was the fugitive president Viktor Yanukovich. In a certain way he did us a great service, when in 2013 his stupidity, greed and carelessness led to opening a portal to real Ukraine in the very center of Kyiv — the Maidan protest camp. It allowed Ukrainians to peek through the dusty curtains of post-Soviet routine and see a transcendent archetype of themselves: free, armed people creating their own democratic, self-organized society independent of the state. The Maidan barricades blocked traffic, yet they showed us a way. Ten years before, after the Orange revolution, which (what a coincidence!) was related to the same Viktor Yanukovich, we learned not to trust any politicians, even those who are very charismatic or great at beekeeping, like the winner of that revolution president Viktor Yushchenko. Looking at a broader historical perspective, both the revolutions were great steps for Ukraine — towards itself. The first one ultimately got us rid of childish illusions and dreams of a savior. The other, so to say, put that knowledge to practice. We finally recalled a rule that had never failed us: “When in doubt, set up a Sich” — a self-governing camp of free Cossacks. If one is to believe Vladislav Surkov, one of Putin’s most influential advisors, the Russian “Deep People” for centuries have been shaping their own state in the only form acceptable for them: an authoritarian empire. According to Surkov, the mighty Leviathan is just a domestic pet for the “true Russian.” Well, maybe it is time to accept that the most natural form of political life for the Ukrainian people is the anarchist Free Territory?

If the popular 2000’s TV shows about influential people from history (known here as “Great Ukrainians”) could really determine which historic personality embodies the nation’s character the most, the Ukrainian show’s winner would be obvious. You already know who this person is: Nestor Makhno. Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci said that any society at certain times produces someone who personifies the nation and allows it to meet itself for the first time. The Ukrainian revolution of 1917–1921 offered many remarkable leaders, yet none of them conformed to the demands of the anarchist peasant masses as well as Makhno, who was a direct continuation of the XVIth century Cossack self-rule.

Obviously, this should not be seen as a call to restore historic early XXth century anarchist praxis of community organizing. And yet, one should not be ashamed of their nature. If all the national experience points to our adherence to direct democracy, one should try to find a shape that would make it work in modern Ukraine. The society is waging a war against an external enemy (the Russian army in the East) and an internal war in every community for our own survival under oligarchic capitalism. There is no doubt that harmonizing community life with deep national tradition will aid us on both the fronts. The latest electoral race bared the obvious: even a relatively successful model of representative democracy for electing the head of state gives no hope for a radical overhaul of the system which the current situation requires.

The repostmodern culture ensured a completely fair victory of a TV comedian who does not have any discernible program, yet has the same old faces behind him. In this situation, a logical step towards implementing a more democratic project in Ukraine would be a demand for *parliamentary republic*. Given the historic development of our political culture, a presidency with bloated powers, where every new leader starts to build an effectively new branch of power around himself, is indisputably archaic. As to further prospects, let us closely watch the experience of those countries where elements of direct democracy are either already implemented

(Switzerland, Iceland, several American and Mexican states) or are on the agenda. This does not only concern the political sphere, but also such democratic mechanism of redistributing wealth as Universal Basic Income (UBI). Experiments to that effect have been ongoing in the aforementioned Switzerland, the Nordic countries, Finland, certain parts of India and elsewhere.

Going back to the freshly elected Guarantor of the Constitution, let us make another small confession before ourselves. Volodymyr Zelensky's victory is the other side of the coin, the dark side of our national mentality, that of complete negation. All polling during the past few months has been showing that Zelensky's unexpected success was a typical protest vote. In other words, people did not vote for the funny man from TV, but against everything associated (sometimes unjustly) with Petro Poroshenko. However, that despite this demand for change, a new "active minority" is coalescing around the outgoing president, a self-proclaimed elite dreaming perhaps of authoritarian prospects, which carries a great risk for our common future. The main challenge is obvious: either Ukraine will be democratic, or there will be no Ukraine.

The bright side of the Ukrainian anarchist identity, our strengths and potentials opened before my eyes, blurry from fascination, five years ago at the Maidan. Frankly, it was only then that I, a product of the sleepy islander community of post-Soviet Crimea, really felt Ukrainian for the first time – a tiny yet organic part of a modern political nation. A highly disciplined self-governing community numbering in millions across the country was shaping a qualitatively new society: first as a tiny island of freedom occupying two square kilometers in central Kyiv, then as a revolutionary wave flushing the old garbage from state offices in the regions, and finally as a self-organized volunteer army backed by hundreds of thousands of volunteer helpers.

Our innate national anarchism is no cause for grief. In contrast, it is an indisputable objective reality, which should be accepted and efficiently used as a road sign that shows the way. The red and black colors denote not only love and misery, as a classic Ukrainian song goes, but also the two most important Ukrainian liberation movements of the 20th century: Makhno's Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine and the WW2 Ukrainian Insurgent Army. And, according to another classic saying, life is only beautiful when it's colorful. Let us remember this.

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