



# The Making of Independent Ukraine

SERHY YEKELCHYK 

RESEARCH



## ABSTRACT

The political and social developments in Ukraine during the last years of the Soviet Union (1988–1991) can be seen as an unfinished revolution. The proclamation of independence in 1991 marked a compromise between national-democratic forces and the republic's old Soviet elites, which slowed down democratic transformations and kept the Red directors in power. The emergence of a mass opposition movement during the early 2000s represented a return to the unfinished agenda of the revolution. The Orange Revolution (2004–2005) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014) re-established the connection between the civil society's struggle for democracy and the rights of the Ukrainian language and culture, which had first developed in the late 1980s. The emergence of a new Ukrainian political nation provoked an aggressive response from Putin's Russia, but its all-out invasion of 2022 only served to consolidate a modern Ukrainian identity as separate from Russia both politically and culturally.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Serhy Yekelchyk**

University of Victoria, Canada  
[serhy@uvic.ca](mailto:serhy@uvic.ca)

---

## KEYWORDS:

Ukraine; Russia; revolution;  
society; war

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Yekelchyk S. The Making of Independent Ukraine. *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2023; 3(1): 6, pp. 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.90>

On 1 December 1991, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic held its referendum on national independence. The result was emphatic: 90.3% voted for independent statehood, with a participation rate of 84.2%. Even more remarkably, only one region produced an approval rate of under 80% – the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, which voted 54.2% in favour and had by far the lowest participation rate – 67.5%. In the east, the two oblasts (provinces) of the Donbas, which had a Russophone majority, voted solidly in support of Ukrainian independence. These data portrayed the republic as united around the political choice of becoming an independent nation-state. What the people did not want was a salvaging of the Soviet Union in some form, or the creation of a more narrow federation comprised of the three East Slavic republics and Kazakhstan, which had been Mikhail Gorbachev's last-ditch effort as Soviet president.

Anyone who had paid attention to a referendum held only months before would have not expected such a landslide. On 17 March 1991, the Soviet Union held a national referendum on its preservation as a federal state. In the Ukrainian SSR, 70.2% of its residents – not yet citizens – supported the continued existence of the Soviet Union as a 'renewed federation of equal and sovereign republics'. That time, the lowest number of 'yes' votes was registered in the three western oblasts that had never been part of the Russian Empire and had been annexed by Stalin in 1939: Lviv (16.4%), Ivano-Frankivsk (18.2%), and Ternopil (19.3%) [1].

Today, more than thirty years later, what can we make of this seeming contradiction in Ukraine's national choice in 1991? Regional political differences are obvious, but they should not be seen as primordial or unchanging: The Donbas did not stand out in the way the Crimea did. Terminology itself also evolved that year. 'Sovereignty', understood as the republic's rights within a federation became 'the right to proclaim independence'. But perhaps the most important observation would be the presence of a new political unity built on a larger foundation than that of ethnic solidarity. Independence became possible when the population at large, including a significant share of national minorities and Ukrainians assimilated into Russian culture, embraced the notion of an independent and democratic Ukraine.

That moment of national unity did not last long during the early 1990s, but Ukrainian society has recovered it more than once since that decade. There was the emergence of a mass oppositional movement in 2001, the Orange Revolution (2004–2005), and the Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014). This new Ukrainian identity remains on full display now, with the mass mobilisation of Ukrainian society defending their country against the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion.

It is possible to argue that the entire history of independent Ukraine resembles this two steps forward, one step back type of progress. There has been a gradual, stop-and-go development of an assertive civil society identifying with Ukraine's democratic choice and acknowledging the importance of the Ukrainian language and culture for the republic's sovereignty.

A second argument, which is interconnected with the first one, can be that this struggle for a democratic Ukraine was from the very beginning a revolution, albeit an unusual one. The Ukrainian case study allows us to rethink the traditional understanding of social forces and political elites in a revolution, as it demonstrates the society's remarkable ability to self-organise politically.

## THE SOVIET LEGACY

The emergence of an independent Ukraine from the Ukrainian SSR determined many trends during the post-independence period. Soviet Ukraine had been the Bolshevik response to the existence in 1917–1920 of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR), a socialist non-Bolshevik state emphasizing national independence as the right of the Ukrainian people and as the only way of overcoming the Russian colonial legacy. The brief period of Ukrainisation in the 1920s, when the Soviet state implemented affirmative-action programs for ethnic Ukrainians and their culture, ended in the 1930s, after Stalin's famine-genocide, the Holodomor (1932–1933). With the Ukrainian peasantry and intelligentsia crushed, the dictator saw no further need for such concessions to Ukrainians. Yet, during the late 1930s, the Ukrainian question remained an important foreign-policy instrument that could prove useful in justifying territorial annexations from the Soviet Union's neighbours to the west, which had a significant Ukrainian population. Once the Red Army forcibly restored between 1939 and 1945 the unity of Ukrainian

ethnolinguistic territories that the UNR had previously proclaimed, the republic's Ukrainian identity came under a full-scale attack, including an assimilationist drive. At the same time, beginning in the mid-1930s, the Soviet state progressively scaled down the Ukrainian culture to a safe ethnographic mode, implicitly locating it in the past, while associating modernity with the Russian culture.

Although Khrushchev undid many of Stalin's policies, assimilation dovetailed perfectly with his agenda of building 'communism' in the Soviet Union. The state used many mechanisms for encouraging Russification. In the absence of a Ukrainian school nearby, urbanites had no choice but to send their children to Russian ones; the last Ukrainian school in the city of Donetsk in the Donbas was closed down in 1964. But even when given a choice, more and more Ukrainian parents, especially by the 1970s, felt that Russian was safer and better in terms of career prospects. The number of ethnic Russians in Ukraine, primarily living in big cities, also increased thanks to in-migration. Khrushchev's much-discussed 'gift' of the Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 can be seen in this light. The UNR intentionally did not claim the peninsula, reserving it for a Crimean Tatar polity, but Khrushchev transferred to the Ukrainian SSR the Crimea that had been purged by Stalin in 1944 of the 'traitorous' Crimean Tatar nation and other non-Slavic groups. In addition to the economic rationale of bringing the peninsula and the adjacent mainland into the same administrative unit, Khrushchev may have been thinking of balancing the unreliable 'nationalistic' western Ukraine with the Crimea, which became a majority-Russian territory after the genocidal deportations of 1944.

There was, however, a notable exception to the general assimilatory trend in postwar Soviet Ukraine. Because of the nationalist anti-Soviet insurgency, which lasted in the westernmost regions until the early 1950s, Stalinist ideologists permitted the continued existence of Ukrainian-language education and media in these western Ukrainian oblasts. Beginning in the late 1950s, when the new generation of students and workers moved from villages to Lviv and other western Ukrainian cities, they did not switch to Russian but established a Ukrainophone urban environment, which the state had to tolerate. Modernity spoke Ukrainian in Lviv, but in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, speaking Ukrainian on the streets while not looking like a peasant could raise suspicions about one's political loyalty.

This essentially colonial situation of culturally alien cities, which was familiar to Ukrainians from the times of the Russian Empire, was not created without a fight. During the late 1950s and 1960s, eastern and central Ukrainian cities also saw a mass influx of new workers and students coming from the surrounding Ukrainophone countryside. While some assimilated eagerly, others held a grudge and others spoke in defence of their culture. The sociologist Bohdan Krawchenko noted perceptively that, for the postwar generation of Ukrainians, the status of the Ukrainian language also served as a symbol of wider social and economic problems [2]. Fighting for the rights of the Ukrainian culture thus meant championing the rights of Ukraine in other spheres—and the KGB indeed saw cultural resistance as political nationalism.

Due to the Soviet system's suppression of nonconformist political expression, writers, literary critics, and artists in Ukraine and other republics came to speak for society in general. They tested the limits of the possible, and many eventually crossed the line into open political dissent. Known in Ukrainian as *shistdesiatnyky* ("sixtiers"), these young Ukrainian patriots of the 1960s worked closely with some representatives of the previous generation, who had seen fighting in World War II, most notably the distinguished novelist Oles Honchar. Some sixtiers saw themselves as the successors of the Ukrainian radical nationalists, but the majority criticised the system from within, urging a return to the 'Leninist' line on Ukrainian culture, which for them meant renewed Ukrainisation. The sixtiers did not subscribe to the exclusivist notion of Ukraine for Ukrainians; in 1966, the movement's leading figure, Ivan Dziuba, gave an important talk against antisemitism at an unauthorised meeting at the largest Holocaust site in Ukraine, Babyn Yar in Kyiv. He came to this memorial site together with the prominent Russian writer and dissident Viktor Nekrasov, who was living in Kyiv [3]. The main organisation of the Ukrainian dissident movement, the Ukrainian Helsinki Group (1976–1981), included Jewish and Baptist activists; it also collaborated with a similar group in Moscow.

By the early 1980s, Soviet Ukraine was a modern, urbanised society with a highly educated population. Proponents of modernisation theory saw such social changes as a precondition of democratisation, but the Soviet case did not fit the general model because of the absence of a

middle class in its traditional understanding. Rather than being independent of the state, Soviet intellectuals and professionals depended on it; most of them worked for state institutions and enterprises [4]. This meant that when the revolution arrived in the late 1980s, it came from within.

## THE REVOLUTION BETRAYED

The declaration of independence on 24 August 1991 caught Ukrainian society in the middle of a transition. The Gorbachev reforms and the revolution from below that they had unleashed challenged the political, economic, and social order of the late Soviet period, but did not overcome it – yet. Indeed, one can argue that it took decades and two revolutions to bring Ukraine’s post-Soviet period to a close, and that some traces of Soviet path-dependency are still evident today.

When we speak of the Soviet ‘collapse’, this terminology obscures the fact that a mass political mobilisation in support of democratic reforms began during the late 1980s. In Ukraine, where the Chernobyl disaster took place, the environmental association Green World was the first non-official organisation to emerge in 1987. The first unauthorised mass rally took place in Lviv in June 1988, when the authorities tried to prevent the establishment of another mass civic organisation, the Taras Shevchenko Ukrainian Language Society. In February 1989, the newspaper of the Writers’ Union, *Literaturna Ukraina* (Literary Ukraine), published the statute of the new civic organisation, the Popular Movement of Ukraine for Perestroika, which became known simply as Rukh, the Ukrainian word for ‘movement’. The conservative Ukrainian Communist Party leadership only allowed its registration in September, after Gorbachev’s intervention. Although led by Ukrainian writers and former dissidents, Rukh represented the interests of the wider society and contained a significant representation of Ukraine’s other ethnic groups. Rukh quickly became a mass popular front, a political catch-all movement, which by the fall of 1990 had 633,000 members. Also in the fall of 1990, a students’ hunger strike in the centre of Kyiv caused the resignation of the prime minister, demonstrating the growing power of civil society.

Yet, when the elections to the Ukrainian legislature took place in the Republic in March 1990, large swaths of the country were still controlled by Soviet political elites. In the absence of registered political parties other than the Communist Party, Rukh became the nucleus of the Democratic bloc, which won in the four western oblasts and in Kyiv city and oblast, as well as in many other large cities. However, the ruling elite could still manipulate the elections in the countryside and smaller towns in central and eastern regions. The nature of the deputy corpus that these elections produced determined the outcome of what could be called the Ukrainian revolution of 1988–1991. Soviet functionaries, factory directors, and the token ‘worker’ and ‘peasant’ deputies whom they controlled together constituted a majority known as the Group of 239. Although they endorsed the slogan ‘For a Soviet, sovereign Ukraine’, the majority really focussed on limiting the extent of democratic reforms. The opposition held only 125 seats, and the third force in the parliament, a group of democratic socialists still affiliated with the Communist Party, 41 seats.

This legislature served until 1994, in the process declaring independence in August 1991 and upgrading itself to the parliament of the independent state. It determined the nature of the Faustian bargain that the Ukrainian democrats had to make in 1991. In the short term, it set up for failure the project of creating a prosperous democratic Ukraine built on the foundation of Ukrainian ethnic identity, but constructed as a civic multicultural society. It also produced rampant corruption and extreme social inequality.

Celebrated as a major milestone in Ukrainian history, the declaration of independence on 24 August 1991 was seen at the time as a problematic compromise between the democratic opposition and Soviet-era functionaries. From the distance of three decades, it appears as the moment when the social and political revolution in Ukraine was cut short. Seeing that the Soviet centre caved in after the abortive conservative coup in Moscow, the Group of 239 achieved an impressive turnaround, going from supporting some form of a union state to embracing full independence. In return, they preserved the political and economic domination of the country for their class.

A political pirouette like that required a competent go-between to deal with the opposition, and the Soviet Ukrainian elites found him in the person of Leonid Kravchuk. A second secretary of the party's Central Committee, he became the speaker of the legislature because the first secretary had not been an effective communicator, even less so in Ukrainian. In his new position, Kravchuk excelled as a negotiator and as a facilitator of compromise; he had been assigned to work with the Rukh before the movement even took off. However, he was neither a revolutionary nor a reformer – even if this was exactly what the Group of 239 wanted.

In the presidential election held on the same day as the independence referendum on 1 December 1991, Rukh ran its own candidate, the respected former dissident Viacheslav Chornovil; but Kravchuk won easily in the first round, with 61.6% against Chornovil's 23.2%. Chornovil won only the three western oblasts, which had rejected the preservation of the Soviet Union in the March 1991 referendum. With Kravchuk as a popularly elected president, the existence of a compromise became more apparent. The 'national-democratic' opposition (so called to distinguish it from the pro-Soviet opposition soon to emerge) supported Kravchuk's efforts at state and nation building, while accepting that there would be neither a lustration of Soviet officials nor market reforms removing economic power from the hands of the Red directors [5].

Kravchuk spent his presidency (1991–1994) developing the embryonic political institutions of Soviet Ukraine into proper state structures of an independent state. State building also involved some disassembling, with the joint Soviet army dismantled and the financial system reconstructed. In foreign policy, he focussed on gaining international recognition for the young state and establishing diplomatic relations with neighbour countries and key global players. Kravchuk intentionally downgraded Ukraine's participation in the Commonwealth of Independent States, trying to distance Ukraine from Russian governance, which was trying to use the Commonwealth as an instrument for preserving its domination of the post-Soviet political and economic space. He spoke about a Western path for Ukraine, but the reality was different. The West was more interested in Russia, and saw it as a crucial partner in the post-Soviet political space, setting aside little time for Ukraine. When it finally did become engaged, it was all about the need for Ukraine to surrender its large but decaying nuclear arsenal inherited from the Soviet Union. The 1994 Budapest Memorandum between Ukraine and all the major nuclear powers finalised this decision, promising guarantees of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Internally, Kravchuk struggled. Rather than reforming Ukraine's large, non-competitive Soviet-style industry that had close links to Russia and its military orders, he subsidised industrial enterprises in the hopes of preventing a jump in unemployment and social tensions. The power of the Red directors remained largely intact; they, too, preferred thriving on subsidies to risking venturing into the free market. Because the national democrats supported Kravchuk's state-building program, they could not benefit from the protest vote. It went instead to the revived opponents on the left; the trouble was that, for much of the 1990s, it was still a Soviet-style Left led by former Soviet functionaries. Indeed, its influence was due to widespread nostalgia for the Soviet welfare model, which looked so appealing in those gloomy years of economic collapse and massive impoverishment.

Yet the nature of politics also changed, checking the Left's revival. The simultaneous fragmentation of political life and mass disillusionment with the outcomes of political activism led to leading politicians and powerful regional bosses campaigning as independents. When a major miners' strike and a conflict between the president and the parliament forced early parliamentary and presidential elections in 1994, their results revealed the new political reality. Independents became the largest group in the new parliament (168 seats), with the Communist Party winning 86 seats and Rukh, 20. In the majoritarian electoral system, with 450 districts each electing a single candidate, the regional economic elites proved the biggest winner. Because of the 50% participation threshold, many seats remained unfilled for years, with low public interest stymying repeated attempts to hold valid elections. Stunningly, these included 13 of 23 seats allocated to Kyiv.

The power of the regional kingpins, who liked the immunity granted to them as parliamentarians, also translated into a new type of political sloganeering. With Kravchuk focussing on the Ukrainisation of education and administration, their spokespersons – supported in this case

by the Communist Party – tried to link Ukrainian patriotism to economic mismanagement and widespread poverty. Rather than being a contest about burning social issues, the presidential election of 1994 turned into a debate about the role of the Ukrainian and Russian languages and the importance of links with Russia, which could allegedly bring prosperity. The 1994 election became the first to produce the electoral map that has been replicated many times since, with the western half of Ukraine voting for a national-democratic candidate and the eastern half a pro-Russian one. Kravchuk, who ran as an independent, lost 45.2% to 52.3% to Leonid Kuchma, his former prime minister. As the former head of the largest rocket-building plant in the Soviet Union (in Dnipropetrovsk, now Dnipro), he was a good representative of the Red directors' march into politics.

As president, Kuchma reneged on his electoral promises to make Russian the second state language and restore closer ties to Russia. In foreign policy, too, he balanced skilfully between Russia and the West, which by then had finally discovered Ukraine's strategic importance next to an increasingly revisionist and unreliable Russia. It was Kuchma who managed to remove the populist, self-proclaimed Crimean 'president' Yuri Meshkov without causing a stir in Russia. Kuchma, he who courted NATO, also nudged Boris Yeltsin's Russia into signing the comprehensive Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership (1997). This agreement finalised the division of the Black Sea Fleet and confirmed Russia's recognition of Ukrainian borders, including the Crimea.

Domestically, Kuchma focussed on fixing the economy in a way that reflected the interests of his class. This included the introduction of a stable currency, the hryvnia (1996), and the privatisation of industry. The Red directors became the greatest beneficiaries of the latter process; after snapping up for mere pennies the privatisation certificates distributed to workers, the bosses proceeded to modernise these enterprises and to explore foreign markets. Kuchma-era privatisation also produced the so-called oligarchs – uber-wealthy business people who usually owed their fortunes to some political connection, and who used their money to maintain considerable political influence.

## A SOCIETY REBORN

The economic revival of the late 1990s, even if interrupted briefly by the aftershocks of the Russian financial crisis of 1998, led to the development of a Ukrainian middle class. Professionals and small business owners became more confident about their future and, at the same time, more concerned about the country's direction. The presidential election of 1999, which granted Kuchma his second term, marked the high point of 'old' politics, in which the presence of convenient nationalistic and communist scarecrows served to persuade voters into supporting 'effective managers', who declared (always at election time) their special feelings for the Russian culture. This election was also a high point for the traditional pro-Soviet Left, which subsequently went into a steep decline, in part due to demographic change.

Kuchma's advisers understood that social discontent, with grand corruption, unfair privatisation, and the emergence of the oligarchs, undermined their candidate's chances. They hired so-called 'political technologists' from Russia, who helped manipulate the public into seeing Kuchma as the safest choice. They determined that their success depended on ensuring that in the run-off their boss would face the backward-looking and uncharismatic Communist Party chief Petro Symonenko. To achieve that – and the incumbent's subsequent victory in the run-off – the Kuchma administration employed all kinds of manipulative strategies and, according to some scholars, electoral fraud [6]. Kuchma duly defeated Symonenko with 57.7% against 38.8%.

The late 1990s also saw the decline of the national-democratic forces in the form in which they had emerged a decade earlier. Rukh, as a smaller political party that came into being after the disintegration of Rukh as a large popular front in the early 1990s, had its greatest success during the parliamentary elections of 1998, when it came second after the Communists with 9.4% of the vote, securing 46 seats. (These elections inaugurated the principle of party lists, which determined 50% of the seats.) But Rukh's widely respected leader, Viacheslav Chornovil, was killed in a car crash – seen by some as suspicious – before he could put forward his bid for the presidency in 1999. None of his successors could reverse the party's decline.

Social and political trends of the late 1990s suggested the possibility of a new beginning, but it took public outrage at President Kuchma's corrupt administration to reimagine Ukrainian politics. In the fall of 2000, a leading opposition journalist named Georgiy Gongadze disappeared; his headless body was later found in a forest. Gongadze had been a pioneer of Internet journalism in Ukraine, but his online newspaper *Ukrainska Pravda* (Ukrainian Truth) acquired a mass national following only after his disappearance and the subsequent political scandal. Two months after Gongadze's murder, Oleksandr Moroz, the speaker of the parliament and leader of the Socialist Party, announced that he was in possession of recordings connecting President Kuchma to this criminal case. Mayhem ensued. The hundreds of hours of recordings leaked on the Internet portrayed the president as a thoroughly corrupt leader, and not just because of his recorded hints to police bosses that it would be good if someone silenced Gongadze.

Shocked by these revelations, Ukrainian society responded with spontaneous mass rallies in downtown Kyiv, which featured, for the first time since 1990–1991, tents intended for a longer 'occupation' of the Maidan, the capital's main plaza. The protest actions continued into 2001, when the brewing mass opposition movement acquired two charismatic leaders: recently dismissed Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko, a Ukrainophone banker with a reputation for resisting the pecuniary temptations of high office, and his former deputy, Yulia Tymoshenko, a firebrand critic of the oligarchical system, which she knew from within. With the traditional Left and the traditional national-democratic Center-Right in decline, the time was ripe for a new catch-all protest movement. The arrival of the Internet and cell phones made recruiting and coordinating much easier. Shunned by the West, the wounded Kuchma also made things worse for himself by turning more to Russia. The new opposition movement called itself 'Ukraine without Kuchma', and it spread like wildfire. Yushchenko also made the smart choice not to focus on the rights of the Ukrainian language per se, but to discuss important social issues in Ukrainian. This served to link the Ukrainian ethnic identity to civic protest and the promise of a new Ukraine.

However, the united opposition faced a new pro-government camp. In the old tradition, Kuchma did not bother to create his own political party, but the decline of the Left allowed a new political force to reclaim the traditional electorate of the Communist and Socialist parties in eastern and southern Ukraine. This force, the Party of Regions, established in 2000, picked up the Left's message about the good old Soviet days, but emphasised the rights of Russian language and culture rather than social equality, which had also been present in the Left's program. The Party of Regions soon established its political domination in the Donbas, a majority Ukrainian but Russophone-depressed mining region, and in the Crimea. It also had a significant presence elsewhere in eastern and southern Ukraine. In 2002, the Party of Regions managed to impose on the reluctant Kuchma its own prime minister, Viktor Yanukovych, who was a native of the Donbas with two criminal convictions from his youth. That year, Yushchenko transformed 'Ukraine without Kuchma' into an electoral bloc called 'Our Ukraine', which received the majority of the party-list votes in the parliamentary elections of 2002.

The showdown between the two forces took place during the presidential elections of 2004. The Party of Regions acted in its usual corrupt and heavy-handed way, a move that was bound to spark mass protests. First, Yushchenko was poisoned with a huge amount of dioxin, which caused temporary organ failure and covered his body and face in lesions. (He eventually recovered; the perpetrators were never identified.) Then the Central Electoral Commission made its server available to the techs sitting in the Party of Regions' headquarters, who proceeded to input skewed reports from the oblasts. However, the opposition was prepared for anything and had also illegally tapped the phones at the headquarters. It thus acquired proof of electoral fraud that was inadmissible in court but that was highly effective in the court of public opinion. As soon as the Central Electoral Commission announced the predictable preliminary results giving a victory to Yanukovych on 22 November 2004, crowds of protesters headed to the Maidan, where 'Our Ukraine' had already installed large television screens. The Orange Revolution, named after Yushchenko's freshly designed campaign colour, began. Unlike the government side, the Orange revolutionaries also used the Internet widely for mobilising support and coordinating political actions [7].

During the tense winter of mass protests and permanent occupation of the Maidan, professionals and small business owners were the backbone of the revolution, while students –

the generation that did not remember Soviet regimentation – led the way at decisive moments. In the end, it was Kuchma's indecision that ensured a peaceful resolution. With foreign affairs, the army, and internal affairs within the purview of Ukrainian presidents, any violent crackdown would have had to be Kuchma's decision, and all he wanted was a peaceful retirement with either formal or informal immunity from prosecution. In the end, he chose to listen to Western mediators. The infamously corrupt Supreme Court suddenly made the decision to hold a new run-off, which Yushchenko duly won.

He did not win by a large margin, however; the result was only 51.2% to 44.2% for Yanukovich. But, the geographical distribution of votes was significant. In the re-run that was judged to be free and fair, the same east-west regional divide that the Party of Regions was trying to solidify and exploit failed to produce expected results. Parts of central Ukraine sided with the western regions by connecting the notions of democracy and rule of law with the revival of the long-oppressed Ukrainian culture. On the Maidan, democracy spoke Ukrainian, or, at least, the supporters of the revolution acknowledged the Ukrainian language's symbolic importance in their struggle for the new Ukraine [8]. In a way, this was a response to the Party of Regions, which combined its rhetoric about the rights of Russophones with its bosses' increasing admiration of the political and economic regime that Putin was building in Russia.

## TO THE MAIDAN, AGAIN

With the revolution accomplished, in January 2005 the Orange revolutionaries went home, both literally – by vacating the Maidan – and politically. They left it up to Yushchenko and Tymoshenko to create a new Ukraine with the help of traditional political parties and the existing state apparatus. There were also some oligarchs who supported the revolution, including the young Petro Poroshenko.

However, Yushchenko and Tymoshenko proved less effective in power than they had been as leaders of a mass protest movement. The president, now a celebrity in the West, was welcome there, but he had little understanding of his portfolio, which included the army and foreign affairs. Ukrainians quickly grew disappointed with his long-winded speeches and lack of a coherent policy agenda. A scandal around his son's expensive car revealed that Yushchenko and his family felt comfortable with the old corrupt system of symbiosis between big business and politics, which he had promised to dismantle. As prime minister, Tymoshenko demonstrated that her fiery speeches while in the opposition translated into equally loud but inefficient populist measures, such as trying to control the price of meat and fuel. As if these failures were not enough, a conflict between Tymoshenko and Poroshenko, who became head of the National Security and Defence Council, resulted in a falling-out between the president and the prime minister. The dynamic Yushchenko-and-Tymoshenko duo was no more, and the revolutionary dream was shattered.

In 2006–2007, an unthinkable configuration emerged in Ukrainian politics when Yushchenko was forced to accept as prime minister his arch-rival Yanukovich – the loser of the Orange Revolution. This happened not as the result of elections, but because of the splits in the Orange camp. By the time the 2010 presidential election rolled around, Yushchenko's approval rating slipped into single digits. In order to maintain any political base at all, he began awarding prestigious medals posthumously to radical Ukrainian nationalist leaders from the mid-twentieth century – a decision welcomed in the westernmost oblasts, but extremely controversial elsewhere in Ukraine. His actions hurt Tymoshenko's cause and could well be the reason for her electoral defeat in 2010.

In the first round Yushchenko, received his 5.5% of the vote, but the presidential election of 2010 became a contest between Yanukovich and Tymoshenko. The latter had served as prime minister again in 2007–2010, following her party's success in the parliamentary elections of 2007. But that was the period of economic stagnation and gas wars with Russia. Yanukovich won in the run-off, with 49% to Tymoshenko's 45.5%.

During the Yanukovich presidency (2010–2014), the Party of Regions also formed the government. The presidential administration gradually appointed reliable political figures from the Donbas to gubernatorial positions all over the country and supported friendly oligarchs in their efforts to expand in other parts of the country. Yanukovich busied himself building a



business empire with his sons, their young friends posing as owners. Ukrainians referred to the president's fast-growing business group as the 'Family', in the Mafia sense.

In domestic politics, Yanukovich sought to build a stronger presidency. The Party of Regions used political pressure and outright bribes to force more parliamentarians to side with its position. Taking advantage of the expensive gas contract that Tymoshenko had to sign with Russia in 2009, Yanukovich had her prosecuted on questionable charges: abuse of power and embezzlement. Tymoshenko received a seven-year prison term, the outcome decried in the West as political persecution. Yanukovich's own gas deal with Russia in 2010 involved significant price discounts in exchange for political commitments that the opposition decried as compromising Ukraine's sovereignty. The most important of them was the extension of Russia's lease on the naval base of Sevastopol in the Crimea to 2042.

However, the Ukrainian oligarchs, whose interests Yanukovich represented, had no interest in seeing the uber-wealthy Russian oligarchs march in and buy up lucrative businesses in Ukraine. Ukraine's foreign trade had long been diversified, with its Russian direction representing only about a third of the total volume. If anything, they aimed for greater engagement with European markets, which went nicely with owning property in Europe and sending their children to study there. In addition to this economic rationale, the Ukrainian political elites remembered Kuchma's success during the late 1990s at playing the West and Russia against each other to the benefit of Ukraine's ruling class. These considerations were behind Yanukovich's decision to enter into negotiations with the EU about a potential Association Agreement. Such an agreement did not put the non-EU partner country on the path to accession, as it is often erroneously assumed. Rather, it involved the acceptance of the EU production standards and legislative norms in preparation for free-trade status.

But this time, Putin reacted angrily to the Ukrainian elites' attempt to balance between the two sides. Using economic leverage and political threats, he bullied Yanukovich into proclaiming a last-minute change of course. On 21 November 2013, the signing ceremony in Vilnius, Lithuania, was cancelled, and a new course on joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union was proclaimed. The Ukrainian public saw this sea change as capitulation to Russia, which put Yanukovich's attempts to establish his party's control over the Ukrainian economy and political life in a new light. It is also important to understand that the notion of 'Europe' functioned in the Ukrainian political discourse and mass culture, not as reference to the real EU structures and practices, but as a metaphor for democracy, rule of law, prosperity, and the struggle against corruption. This 'Europe' also served as the symbolic opposite of Putin's Russia [9].

It was for this reason that Yanukovich's reversal of course caused a revolution. Few people knew the details of the Association Agreement, but the refusal to sign it meant taking away any hopes for a better future for Ukraine. Among many angry posts appearing on social media on 21 November, an appeal on Facebook by the Afghani-Ukrainian journalist Mustafa Nayyem stood out. He called on Ukrainians to gather on the Maidan to protest Yanukovich's capitulation to Putin. Thousands showed up that night and soon, following the police's brutal attack on protesting students, hundreds of thousands came to the city centre. The Revolution of Dignity had begun.

This revolution was a puzzle to social scientists. All the opposition parties missed its start, and only a small minority of participants identified as members or sympathisers of any party. The defence of the Maidan and the mass volunteering effort that winter relied only on ad hoc appeals broadcast on social media, but they produced impressive results. The traditional ways of measuring the strength of civil society, such as the number of NGOs per thousand people, seemed to indicate that Ukraine had a very weak civil society. Yet, its remarkable strength was obvious to any observer [10]. One possible explanation is the legacy of Ukraine's Soviet past, in which the only political party and state-controlled 'civic organisations' generated distrust in such forms of activism. Another could be the repeated disillusionment with the institutionalisation of opposition movements both during the early 1990s and after the Orange Revolution.

This time the Ukrainian authorities had a lot to lose, and Yanukovich held on until the very end, when the police killings of some one hundred protestors on 18–21 February 2014 took the struggle on the Maidan to a new level. The police themselves became frightened of the consequences and withdrew, thus forcing Yanukovich to flee to Russia. The Party of Regions disintegrated, and its deputies joined the parliamentary opposition in voting to formalise the

transfer of power to an acting president. Snap presidential elections then produced a clear victory in the first round for Petro Poroshenko, who, despite his having served in 2012 as a minister in Yanukovych's government, presented himself as a descendent of the national-democratic forces from the 1990s and the early 2000s. The public saw the billionaire oligarch and experienced politician Poroshenko as best qualified to stabilise the Ukrainian state, which would presumably stop Russia's aggression in the wake of the Revolution of Dignity.

The 2014 elections also rendered hollow any Western concerns about the alleged rise of the radical right in Ukraine – incidentally, also a major point in Putin's propaganda war. The two presidential candidates from radical-nationalist organisations received only 1.2 and 0.7% of votes, respectively.

For all the hopes that Ukrainian society invested in him, while Poroshenko was in office, he struggled on the two fronts that mattered most. Despite his genuine efforts to overcome corruption and establish a truly independent judiciary and police force, he largely failed to overcome the oligarchical system, of which he himself had been part. Although Poroshenko tried to rebuild the Ukrainian army after decades of neglect and corruption, it was mostly the volunteers who stopped the Russian assault in the Donbas in 2014–2015. (The Ukrainians authorities did not try to resist the Russian army when it took over the Crimea in 2014, straight after the revolution's victory.) The peace process, which had been moderated by the leaders of France and Germany, produced several ceasefires and, following some painful military defeats in 2015, a plan of a potential peace settlement that was unfavorable for Ukraine—and unrealistic.

During the presidential elections of 2019, Ukrainians judged Poroshenko primarily based on his domestic policies, and voted overwhelmingly for a complete political novice, the charismatic 39-year-old actor and comedian Volodymyr Zelensky. He crushed Poroshenko in the run-off by getting an unprecedented 73.2% of the votes. In the parliamentary elections that followed, his brand-new political party 'Servant of the People' swept to power by obtaining, for the first time in modern Ukrainian politics, an outright majority in the parliament (254 seats out of 450).

If Zelensky came into office with vague promises to clean up the corrupt political system and rejuvenate the peace process simply by 'stopping the shooting', he soon found himself continuing many of Poroshenko's policies. He realised the impossibility of trusting Putin with anything, and began taking painful steps toward implementing major reforms in Ukraine. These included passing laws stripping parliamentarians of immunity and establishing a process for impeaching a president. In the economic sphere, Zelensky proved wrong those commentators who portrayed him as the puppet of an oligarch owner of the TV channel that had broadcast Zelensky's entertainment shows. As president, he adopted measures to undermine the influence of this businessman in particular and all oligarchs in general. Some of Zelensky's policy and personnel decisions seemed hasty and based on his trust in people whom he knew from his entertainment-industry days. Yet, he and his inner circle also demonstrated their ability to listen to the public, including reacting to popular posts on social media. In other words, they were forced to acknowledge the power of public opinion and social self-organisation.

When Zelensky emerged after the all-out Russian invasion in February 2022 as Ukraine's unquestionable wartime leader, this did not mean that Ukrainians accepted his program or vision. Rather, he had molded himself into a perfect representative of society's drive to defend Ukraine. Many of his close political collaborators remain deeply unpopular, and corrupt motives are often suspected in their actions. But Ukrainian civil society strongly identifies with the defence of its democratic values, and it is this message that Zelensky delivers to the world on the people's behalf. The enormous scale of domestic volunteer activities in support of the Ukrainian army and humanitarian causes is such that, in many cases, informal networks of volunteers take over the state's responsibilities. This is precisely the kind of people power that makes the Putin regime so scared of Ukraine, the country that emerged from the fire of the Maidan.

In 2022, Putin decided on an all-out invasion of Ukraine in part because he fell victim to his regime's own propaganda, which alleged mass support for Russia among Ukraine's ethnic Russian and Russophone population. But the Russian army's atrocities and deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure had the opposite effect: They destroyed whatever remained of the Soviet myth of 'fraternal' relations between Ukrainians and Russians. The war also prompted

in Ukraine a rejection of Russian culture as a tool of imperial domination, complete with the removal of once-obligatory monuments to Russian writers. Putin sought to reclaim Ukraine. Instead he lost it for good.

The Ukrainian revolution, which began in the Soviet Union in 1988–91 and continued through the political struggles culminating in the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity, was bound to produce a war with Putin's Russia. For Ukraine, the war marks the end of the post-Soviet period in its history. Based on the acknowledgement of the Ukrainian language and culture as important markers of sovereignty, modern Ukrainian identity is nevertheless civic and political rather than ethnic. The very existence of democratic Ukraine is a challenge to Putin's political model and his drive to restore Russia's imperialist past. But authoritarian Russia, which has suppressed and atomised its own society, lacks the kind of social support and volunteering that Ukrainians demonstrate in defence of their country. In the fight between the army of convicts and mercenaries and the people at arms, the final victory can only be Ukraine's.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Serhy Yekelchyk  [orcid.org/0000-0001-9401-3475](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9401-3475)  
University of Victoria, Canada

## REFERENCES

1. **Kuzio T, Wilson A.** Ukraine: Perestroika to Independence. Edmonton: CIUS Press. 1994; 159–162 and 184–191. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-23240-6>
2. **Krawchenko B.** Social change and national consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine London: Macmillan. 1985; 198. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-09548-3>
3. **Petrovsky-Shtern Y.** A paradigm-changing day: The twenty-fifth anniversary of Babyn Yar and Ukrainian-Jewish relations. *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*. 2021; 38(3–4): 227–258.
4. **Hough JF.** Democratisation and revolution in the USSR, 1985–1991. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. 1997; 11–15.
5. **Wilson A.** The Ukrainians: unexpected nation, 4th ed. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2015; 174–176.
6. **Myagkov M, Ordeshool PC.** The trail of votes in Ukraine's 1998, 1999, and 2002 elections. *Post-Soviet Affairs*. 2005; 21(1): 56–71, here 65–67. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.21.1.56>
7. **Wilson A.** Ukraine's Orange Revolution. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2005; 131–132.
8. **Yekelchyk S.** Ukraine: Birth of a modern nation. New York: Oxford University Press. 2007; 214 and 218.
9. **Yekelchyk S.** Ukraine: What everyone needs to know, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press. 2020; 93. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/wentk/9780197532102.001.0001>
10. **Marples DR, Mills FV.** (eds.) Ukraine's Euromaidan: Analyses of a civil revolution Stuttgart: Ibidem; 2015.

### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Yekelchyk S. The Making of Independent Ukraine. *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2023; 3(1): 6, pp. 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepr.90>

**Submitted:** 25 May 2023

**Accepted:** 16 June 2023

**Published:** 08 September 2023

### COPYRIGHT:

© 2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

*LSE Public Policy Review* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.