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Can Ukraine modernise?

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*An old guard corrupt to the bones, an awakened but leaderless civil society, and now the looming prospect of a country divided for years to come. Can Ukrainian society modernise, and how? LSEE Research Officer **Vesna Popovski** gives her first-hand experience, as she investigated governance and social cohesion in Ukraine for the [FP7 project SEARCH "Sharing Knowledge Assets: Intere regionally Cohesive Neighborhoods"](#).*

The events in Ukraine in the last few months clearly highlight the division between political elites (of all political stripes) and the rest of the society which stood up to Viktor Yanukovich and his ruling elite. During my latest research trip to Ukraine, in May 2013, Ukraine felt as a deeply divided society where people lived next to each other but not with each other. It also felt that people were resigned to living with corruption and, as a result, with huge differences between rich and poor. However the situation started to change in November and three events painfully effected the society; firstly, not signing the Association Agreement in November in Vilnius and, secondly, accepting financial support from Putin in December in Moscow. The agreement brought Ukraine, on the surface, badly needed cash (in the shape of a credit) to cover budget deficit. But the deficit is created by the ruling elite which is corrupt up to their ears. Also the gas price offered to Ukraine is negotiable each 3 months and can be stopped as a result of this 3-monthly review. But the final one happened in Kyiv on 16th January 2014 and shook civil society from deep sleep as well as the majority of population from submission and patience since it broke the constitutional procedures and therefore the Constitution. It does not matter to the majority of population that the President and the Parliament repealed the anti-protest legislation on 31st January 2014 since both institutions have been discredited. At issue was not any longer a sense of belonging to Europe and a European dream but reality, that is democratic regime; democratic form of government was abolished. The curtain fell off. With laws, curbing political and civil rights, voted in (the opposition parties were sitting in the Parliament), which came to power on 21st January 2014, it was clear that legitimately voted in President who, from the very start in his office has introduced laws which turned Ukraine from parliamentary democracy into presidential democracy, was now turning openly into an authoritarian dictator ready to protect himself and three clans/ networks which brought and support him in power. The three clans or networks are: The Family, including the two sons of Viktor Yanukovich, and the other two clans are headed by Andriy Kluev and Rinat Akhmetov, and Serhiy Levochkin and Dmytro Firtash.

The majority of protesters, who occupied Maidan Square in Kyiv in late November 2013, were young and educated youth who did not want any political party to lead them. These last few months they are joined by the majority of citizens of Kyiv, who come and go, as well as by citizens from especially Western Ukraine. To start with, that is late November 2013, the political parties of the opposition were not interested in the protest movement on the same scale as they are today. Opposition political parties are courting it but the members of the protest movement are not happy to collaborate. One also has to highlight that there are a lot of different movements which are taking part in the protests in Kyiv or other part of Ukraine. They are of all political stripes although some of them have caught more media attention than the others. They see political opposition partly responsible for the political and economic downturn and the levels of corruption. And they do not want to be guided by them. They all remember what happened after the Orange Revolution when the opposition came to power and started to squabble and enrich themselves. The protesters are now forming parallel political institutions. From the practical as well as pragmatic point of view they need a leader and the one is still not emerging.

For an in-depth analysis, read the recent paper by Vesna Popovski and Will Bartlett [Local Governance and Social Cohesion in Ukraine](#).

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