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Ukraine:

An uncertain future

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The Ukrainian opposition parties did not win the parliamentary vote of defiance they had sought on December 3, 2013, seeking to sanction the non-signature by the Ukrainian president of the Association Agreement negotiated with the European Union.

Divided between negotiating rewordings and blockading government buildings to obtain early elections, they relied on the mobilisation of a million protesters on December 8, against “the sale of the Ukraine to Russia”. It was police violence against the first “pro-European” demonstrations which changed the breadth of the mobilizations on December 1 and accentuated the discrediting of the regime. Fearing the opposition would spread to his Russophone bastions in the east of the country, the Ukrainian prime minister came to Parliament on December 3 to ask forgiveness for these “excesses”, in the name of the government and of the president. And he proposed a tripartite commission (government, opposition and European mediators) to investigate the violence. But part of the opposition advocates ongoing mobilizations to blockade public buildings – at the risk of provoking confrontations – hoping thus to bring the government down.

But we are far from a new “Orange Revolution” in the style of the “Orange candidates” who succeeded the régime of Leonid Kuchma (1993-2004), borne by popular hopes of a non-corrupt regime. Disillusionment was rapid, hence the election in 2010 of the candidate defeated in 2005 – Viktor Yanukovich.

He was elected on the basis of a programme of military “neutrality” and balancing of international relations – allowing the de facto reconciliation of various oligarchs. Also negotiations with the EU were carried out by the ruling party in Vilnius, until the recent rupture. The hope of the opposition parties of winning a vote of defiance in parliament on December 3 was not then unfounded.

Behind all this, in addition to the fate of Yulia Tymoshenko which the EU has made a *casus belli*, there is the socio-economic situation of the Ukraine and the nature of the accords. The country has not recovered from the shock of the disintegration of the USSR and privatisation, or from the recession of 2009. Its GDP per inhabitant is 20% of the EU average, lower than Rumania and Bulgaria. The country’s budget deficit has grown since 2009 (it was nearly 6% of GDP in 2010) and the trade deficit was more than -7% of GDP in 2012. But the ruling party fears a social explosion in case of an increase in energy prices: it had to choose between the Russian offers and the increases advocated by the IMF– after vainly asking the EU to intervene with the IMF or organise a tripartite negotiation (Russia, Ukraine and EU).

Most of the European media has deflected emphasis from the question of the treaty of association with the EU that president Viktor Yanukovich has refused to sign towards a struggle for democracy. The democratic stakes are real, but they lie elsewhere. The parties are all very discredited – except perhaps for that of the former boxing champion Vitali Klitschko (precisely because they denounce the endemic corruption and stress some of the social issues). Like the revolt of the indignant in Bulgaria, the movement is both critical of the parties and of various ideological shades: blue and yellow are at the same time the colours of the Ukraine, of an idealised EU flag and of the Svoboda/Liberty party which commemorates the SS battalions, destroys a statue of Lenin and demands the banning of the Communist Party – signs of a democratic European consciousness?