

# FIIA 16/2016 COMMENT

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## Ukraine, 25 years of independence: a strong nation deserves an effective state

During the ongoing conflict in Donbas, Ukraine – its multiple social ills, regional and linguistic differences notwithstanding – demonstrated unprecedented national mobilization. But a modern and transparent state is still lacking.

The quarter of a century that has passed since Ukraine declared its independence on August 24, 1991 has been a painful and dramatic period in the country's history, full of missed opportunities, losses and real tragedies, individual as well as national. And today's festivities cannot and should not hide the fact that Ukraine has a long uphill struggle ahead of it in order to build a successful state.

From 1990 to 2015, based on World Bank data, Ukraine's per capita gross domestic product (purchasing power parity, current international dollars) increased from 6,780 to only 7,920 US dollars, which means that, economically speaking, the life of a whole generation was wasted and failed to make the nation significantly wealthier. Ukraine's population – in constitutional borders, namely including Crimea (authors) – shrank in a proportion usually observed in cases of major wars, from 52 million people in 1991 to 45.5 million in 2014, not taking into account massive labour emigration. In 2015, the UN Human Development Index placed Ukraine in 81<sup>st</sup> position, compared with 50<sup>th</sup> place given to neighbouring Belarus, also a former Soviet republic.

Internally, the country has been run and ruined by oligarchs, buying

media and political parties to serve their predatory interests. Corruption has been all-pervasive. In 2015, in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, Ukraine found itself in 130<sup>th</sup> position, between Paraguay and Comoros, out of 168 countries surveyed.

Externally, a systemic conflict with Russia, which one of the authors characterized as a "chronic crisis" and a "downward spiral" as early as the end of the 1990s, became a central element of Ukraine's foreign policy posture. This was not Ukraine's preferred choice. The origin of the conflict was Moscow's refusal to respect the centrifugal logic of Ukraine's independence, which could only be conceptualized as independence *from* Russia. But what matters here is that this conflict has always been a colossal drain on Ukraine's resources, even if at the same time its ruling elites have been able to pocket Russia's economic subsidies, paying for those with a promise, whether credible or not, of geopolitical loyalty.

Meanwhile, its geopolitical importance notwithstanding, unlike Central Europe or the Baltic states, Ukraine has not been able to obtain a realistic integration perspective in the EU or NATO. Russia's categorical "No" was a factor, as was the lack of

public consensus on the need for a Western orientation. But on top of this, the country's leaders were too unwilling to change and too willing to continue the opaque relationship with the Kremlin.

What then explains why, faced in 2014 with a dual ordeal of separatism and external aggression, the country did not collapse and did not surrender? True, it lost territories in the beginning, but gradually overcame the initial shock and proved capable of organizing itself at times of war. Hardly able to muster several thousand combat-ready troops in March 2014, at the moment of Crimea's annexation by Russia, today Ukraine maintains formidable armed forces amounting to over 200,000. It is managing the task of dealing with nearly 1.8 million internally displaced persons, as of July 2016. A phenomenal volunteer movement compensates to a large extent for the weaknesses of state structures. Most importantly, the population, day after day, continues to endure the economic hardship and remains supportive of the cause.

The key to understanding lies in the fact that Ukraine has experienced a true national mobilization. In turn, this implies that the process of building the Ukrainian political nation and strengthening national

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consciousness, despite all regional, ethnic and linguistic differences, has developed rather far since 1991. The best evidence of that is seeing Russian speakers rejecting the *Novorossiya* project and fighting for the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

The reason why Ukraine is more attractive for these people than Russia is that it can give or promise them political freedoms, pluralism, possibilities for self-organization in protecting their rights, in choosing and changing their rulers and, potentially, better protection of property. However simplified, this may well be the very essence of the “habit of independence” which Ukraine citizens have learned from practice, from multiple competitive elections and massive protests against fraud and injustice. Furthermore, the more corrupt and dysfunctional the state, the more horizontal ties and civil society mechanisms were needed, the stronger they became, and the more successful were the actions that ensued.

The problem is that in times of an open military conflict with a well-organized and no less strongly motivated foreign power, Ukraine cannot rely on national mobilization and foreign assistance only. It needs an effective and trustworthy state. It cannot afford a dichotomy between

the post-revolutionary vibrant civil society and state institutions, which are reform-resistant, costly and, as the above-mentioned ratings show, still highly corrupt. It cannot live with a political class that is unable to work together and whose behaviour frustrates its own citizens and foreign friends alike.

If this is not properly realized – by the elites first of all – future Ukraine independence anniversaries may provide more reasons for sad reflections than for congratulations.