

The Ukrainian Crisis and the Jews: A Time for Hope or Despair?

Simon Geissbühler

Simon Geissbühler is a Swiss political scientist and diplomat. He served in Bucharest (2007–10) and in Warsaw (2010–15). He is the author of several books and articles on East European Jewish history and Jewish heritage and recently edited a volume on the revolution in Ukraine entitled Kiew — Revolution 3.0. Der Euromaidan 2013/14 und die Zukunftsperspektiven der Ukraine.

Under President Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine steadily drifted back to a less and less competitive authoritarianism.¹ Electoral competition existed but was unfair; media access for the opposition was heavily restricted; state resources were abused to fill the pockets of the president, his “family” and allied oligarchs; and opposition leaders were harassed or tossed into jail. Only rhetorically did Yanukovych favor a rapprochement with the European Union, but he did nothing to reform the Ukrainian economy or to honor democratic standards. Ukraine’s economic and especially its financial crisis deepened in 2013.

A significant segment of the Ukrainian population, especially the young and better educated, became increasingly fed up with the semi-authoritarian system, the corruption, and the “post-Soviet” mentality. The Ukrainian government’s unilateral decision to halt the rapprochement with the EU and to sign neither the Association Agreement nor the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius at the end of November 2013 led to a massive mobilization of the Ukrainian population that is pro-Western. This was accompanied by widespread protests and the emergence of the Euromaidan in Kyiv. On December 17, Yanukovych signed an agreement with Russia in which Moscow pledged to provide Kyiv with loans and steeply discounted gas. This attempt to retain power and preserve the status quo fueled the protests in Kyiv and elsewhere in Ukraine.

The regime was surprised by the virulence and tenacity of the protesters and resorted to violence instead of dialogue. The death of up to 100 people on the Maidan on February 18–20 of this year was the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. Yanukovych was compelled to sign a deal with the opposition on February 21 brokered by the foreign ministers of Germany, France, and Poland. Almost immediately afterward, however, Yanukovych fled Kyiv and subsequently Ukraine. His regime was washed away by a democratic revolution. Yanukovych was impeached, his nemesis, Yulia Tymoshenko, was released from prison, and a new government was formed in late February.

Russia, which traditionally sees Ukraine as part of its sphere of influence,² has a completely different reading of what happened in Kyiv. Moscow continues to characterize the ousting of President Yanukovich as an illegal “coup d’état” and does not recognize the new Ukrainian government.

In early March, Russian troops seized control of Crimea. US Secretary of State John Kerry depicted this invasion as “an incredible act of aggression.” On March 16, a majority of Crimeans decided in a staged referendum to join Russia. The referendum, which was declared illegal by all Western states, precipitated sanctions by the EU, the United States, and other countries against Russia. Tensions between the EU, the US, and the Ukrainian government on the one side, and Russia on the other, have peaked. The situation further deteriorated with pro-Russian separatists seizing power in several cities in eastern Ukraine and seems to have spiraled out of control. Violent confrontations have erupted between these Russian-backed groups (and the “little green men” supporting them) and the pro-Ukrainians and the Ukrainian armed forces.

What does all this mean for the Jews in Ukraine and for Jewish–Ukrainian relations? Obviously, it depends on whom you ask. But it is evident that the Jewish community in Ukraine, which today numbers some 70,000 (some sources cite much higher figures), is certainly affected by the changes in the country and cannot ignore them.

One school of thought opines that the revolution—if it leads to a democratic transition—is a positive development for the Jews in the country, at least in the long run. This argument has both a sound theoretical and empirical basis. Democracies have historically been more peaceful than authoritarian or dictatorial regimes and have led to greater respect and tolerance for minorities in their midst. Basic civic and human rights are generally better protected in democratic states than in authoritarian or dictatorial ones. A democratic Ukraine with strong ties to the EU will, so the argument goes, respect human rights in general and the rights of minorities in particular. It might also start to deal with its own tortured past, especially the widespread Ukrainian collaboration with Nazi Germany during World War II and in the Holocaust.

Some representatives of the right-wing Svoboda party (formerly known as the Social-National Party of Ukraine) have received ministerial posts. According to this first school of thought, the cooptation of Svoboda is positive. With that party in power, and therefore under international scrutiny, it may yet moderate its antisemitic rhetoric. Oleh Tyahnybok, Svoboda’s leader, has already considerably toned down his. The success of Svoboda in certain regions notwithstanding, right-wing extremist and antisemitic parties have remained at the margins of Ukrainian

politics.³ The latest opinion polls for the presidential elections scheduled for May 25 have Tyahnybok at a distant ninth place with around 2.1 percent of the vote.⁴

Some Jews are represented in the new government structures. One of the three deputy prime ministers is the successful and popular mayor of Vinnytsia, Volodymyr Groysman, who is Jewish. Billionaire Ihor Kolomoisky, who is also Jewish, was appointed governor of Dnipropetrovsk. While these appointments are certainly based on merits (and not on religious affiliation), they are further proof that allegations that the new government is somehow antisemitic are groundless. Acting Ukrainian President Oleksander Turchynov has pledged to do everything in his power to protect the country's Jewish community.⁵

An outspoken proponent of this school of thought is Josef Zissels, the chairman of the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine, who delivered a passionate speech on the Maidan on December 15, 2013.⁶ Zissels forcefully challenged the “artificially created imagery of a Bandera-following Ukrainian, of a xenophobic Ukrainian, of an antisemitic Ukrainian.” He asked the crowd if “we want to return to our Eurasian past or move into a European future.” Zissels said that there is always some danger for Jews and the Jewish community in Ukraine, but that the “the risks of attack from protesters and even radical groups are minimal.” He ended his speech with the following emotional statement: “Three thousand years ago my people took forty years to walk from slavery to freedom. We—the people of Ukraine—have already gone halfway. There is not much longer to go!”

In an open letter initiated by Zissels and signed by a number of prominent Ukrainian Jews at the beginning of March, Russian President Putin was heavily criticized: “Your certainty of the growth of antisemitism in Ukraine does not correspond to the actual facts. It seems you have confused Ukraine with Russia, where Jewish organizations noticed an increase in antisemitic tendencies last year.” The letter further stated that Ukrainian Jews “are quite capable of protecting our rights in a constructive dialogue and in cooperation with the government and civil society of a sovereign, democratic, and united Ukraine.”⁷

Zissels maintains that antisemitic violence in Ukraine has declined since 2006. The Association recorded thirteen antisemitic incidents in 2013. Zissels pointedly told an audience in Germany (where 1,300 antisemitic incidents were reported in 2013), “We don’t need your help. We can deal with the antisemites in Ukraine ourselves. But maybe we can help you.” He emphasized that it was somewhat ironic that Germans were lecturing a Ukrainian Jew on the alleged nationalism and antisemitism of the Euromaidan movement and thereby trying to justify the Russian behavior and rhetoric.⁸

Some Jews were among the activists on the Maidan. One example is that of the journalist Vitaly Portnikov, who, from the outset, was a staunch supporter of the protest movement. There was a report in the well-respected Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag* and other media outlets on a Ukrainian Jew who had served in the IDF and who was one of the “military” leaders on the Maidan. He dismissed the talk about the alleged right-wing extremism of many oppositionists as “the last propaganda weapon” of the Yanukovich regime.⁹ There were, indeed, a considerable number of Jewish “fighters” on the Maidan. David Fishman, a professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, said that the experience of fighting alongside Jews may have had an effect on the views and the language of the extremist Pravyi Sektor [Right Sector] group.¹⁰ Purportedly, four of the protesters killed on the Maidan in Kyiv were Jewish.¹¹

International Jewish groups have also been cautiously optimistic about the revolution in Ukraine. World Jewish Congress President Ambassador Ronald S. Lauder said on February 24, 2014 that he looked forward to a democratic and peaceful future for Ukraine: “We hope and expect that all members of the new Ukrainian interim government will promote equal rights for all citizens and harmony among Ukraine’s diverse communities.”¹²

A second school of thought is much more pessimistic. First, it is based on the historical experience that popular upheavals and revolutions represent dangerous times for the Jews. In such periods, Jews are routinely depicted as scapegoats. Second, it is grounded in the long history of the tortured relations between Jews and Ukrainians. Third, it maintains that some right-wing antisemitic groups have played a relatively important role in the Maidan protests.

The proponents of this second school of thought maintain that the political situation in Ukraine will remain fluid for a long time and that democratic consolidation will take years, if not decades, if it happens at all. Many Jews in Ukraine feel that they are especially at risk during this politically and economically unstable period. Antisemitism is often and easily used in such periods of destabilization as a valve through which popular discontent and nationalism is unleashed.

Obviously, the long history of troublesome relations between Jews and Ukrainians does not provide much reassurance or solace to Jews in Ukraine today. While it is true that Jews and Ukrainians have “coexisted relatively peacefully” for many decades¹³—as German-Jewish historian Frank Golczewski has correctly pointed out—time and again there have been violent outbreaks of Ukrainian antisemitism, for example during the Khmelnytsky Uprising in 1648 or during World War II. The collaboration between the Ukrainians and the Germans during the Holocaust is, of course, well documented.¹⁴ There were Ukrainian rescuers, but in general,

the Ukrainian population was—as Yehuda Bauer wrote—“very hostile” to the Jews.¹⁵ Similarly, historian Shimon Redlich also comes to the conclusion that the Ukrainians were, with a few notable exceptions, “either indifferent or anti-Jewish” during World War II.¹⁶

Furthermore, the pessimistic school of thought points to well-known, disturbing antisemitic statements by representatives of opposition groups, especially Svoboda and its leader, Tyahnybok. He has, however, moved from the far-right and has adopted a somewhat more moderate stance.¹⁷ Even more radical and openly antisemitic are important members of Dmytro Yarosh’s Pravyi Sektor. Yarosh’s pledge to Israel’s ambassador to Kyiv in early March to oppose antisemitism is seen as a mere bluff by many skeptics.¹⁸

The Russian Foreign Ministry maintained on February 24, 2014 that there were widespread “criminal actions of extremists,” including “Neo-Nazi and antisemitic manifestations.”¹⁹ It has repeatedly warned of growing antisemitism in Ukraine. While most of these warnings are part of the Kremlin’s propaganda campaign, and Anshel Pfeffer of the Israeli *Haaretz* daily was on target when he noted that antisemitism, “though a real threat, is being used by the Kremlin as a political football,”²⁰ antipathy and violence directed toward Jews undoubtedly continue to be a problem in Ukraine. In mid-February, Chabad Chief Rabbi Moshe Reuven Azman forecasted a gloomy future: “I told my congregation to leave the city center or to leave the city altogether—and, if possible, the country. I don’t want to tempt fate, but there are constant warnings concerning intentions to attack Jewish institutions.”²¹

Some more pessimistic Jews have argued that the Jewish community in Ukraine should at least stay neutral. Zissels was criticized for his openly pro-opposition stance by some representatives of Jewish organizations in Ukraine. WJC Vice-President Boris Fuchsmann, who also serves as the President of the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine, said publicly that he disagreed with Zissels.²² He maintained that while the new government and its main representatives were not antisemitic, the danger of antisemitic violence, and even pogroms, was real.²³

The Jews on the Crimean peninsula are a special case. They really find themselves between the proverbial rock and hard place. On the one hand, some of them do feel close to Russia or at least closer to Russia than to Ukraine; in fact, some have even openly welcomed the Russian annexation of Crimea.²⁴ On the other hand, several leaders of the Jewish community and rabbis who have been critical of the Russian annexation have left Crimea. Simferopol’s Rabbi Yitzchak Meyer Lipszyc was asked by Chabad headquarters to leave Crimea, which he did: “For the last twenty-two years under the Ukrainian government, everything has been

going very well. When this situation began, it turned things upside down.... Oddly enough we had to leave there more because we were Americans and not because we were Jewish."²⁵

It is still too early to make conclusive statements on the impact of the revolution in Ukraine on the Jews and the Jewish community because the political situation there remains extremely volatile. Jews in Ukraine are clearly divided. Some feel close to the new government and are highly critical of Russia, while others are afraid of the current situation and fear the worst. However, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn.

First, the situation should not be over-dramatized. The revolution did not have a crushing impact on the daily lives of most ordinary citizens of Ukraine, with the obvious exception of people living in hotspots such as downtown Kyiv, some cities in the east of Ukraine, and Crimea. People go to work and live their lives. The same is true for the Jews in Ukraine. There is also no statistical evidence to suggest that antisemitism has generally increased (or decreased) in Ukraine in the last few months.²⁶ The US State Department issued a statement on March 5, 2014 that "Jewish groups in southern and eastern Ukraine report that they have not seen an increase in antisemitic incidents."²⁷

Second, antisemitism is certainly more widespread in Ukraine than is officially acknowledged.²⁸ However, there is no solid data to suggest that Ukraine is significantly more antisemitic than some of the other post-Communist European countries. Abraham Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League, wrote that "it is fair to say that there was more antisemitism manifest in the worldwide Occupy Wall Street movement than we have seen so far in the revolution taking place in Ukraine."²⁹

Third, while it is understandable that some Jews point to the dire historical record regarding Ukrainian–Jewish relations and to Ukrainian antisemitism past and present, historical analogies are not always useful or applicable. Frank Golczewski is correct in pointing out the following: "If history teaches anything, it warns us of the dangers of generalizing and labeling a people as a whole as an enemy."³⁰

The celebrated Polish-Jewish intellectual Konstanty Gebert has argued that "Putin's claim that fascists have taken control in Kyiv is fundamentally bogus, while Russia's despicable actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine are all too real."³¹ As Timothy Snyder observed: "Jews can be victims, of course, and if the Russian invasion continues, they likely will be, along with the Roma and the Crimean Tatars, who are already suffering where Russian troops control Ukrainian territory, along with Ukrainians and everyone else."³²

This being said, the situation should be followed closely. Recently, there have been several antisemitic incidents that must be taken seriously. The voices of Jewish leaders in Ukraine must be heard and taken into account. International organizations such as the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the OSCE and the OSCE Personal Representative on Combating Antisemitism, Rabbi Andrew Baker, should and certainly will closely monitor the situation.

The new Ukrainian government is responsible for the protection of the country's minorities, including Jews, who have traditionally been, and still are, an enriching and vital part of society. The international community should urge Kyiv to honor its commitments regarding minorities. Exactly because Ukraine needs Western support, the West is able to wield considerable leverage in influencing the government's policies toward minorities in general and Jews in particular. The long-term success or failure of the democratic transition in Ukraine will be measured to a great degree by its pronouncements and, above all, its actions concerning its Jewish community and the extent to which Jews feel safe.

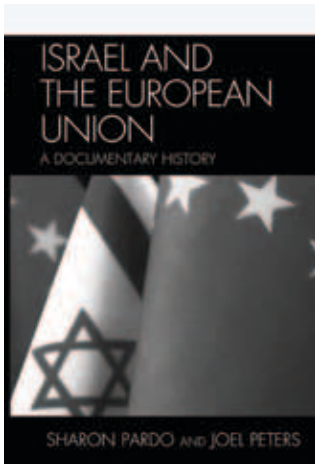
Notes

The opinions expressed in this articles are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

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