Youth in Ukraine: The motor of change?

Ana Mangas
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This is an attempt to give a portrait of Ukrainian youth, with all the limitations implied when one sets out to analyse something that is living, heterogeneous and in a state of continuous transformation. More than two years after the revolution of the Euromaidan, what are the main goals of the new generations? And what are their aspirations?

“I came to the Maidan because the government was stealing the future of Ukraine and the aspirations of the young”, says a young man aged no more than twenty-five in Winter on Fire, a documentary that covers the months of the Euromaidan revolution, protests that from the outset were marked by massive participation by students and the young. This was not the first time that youth had taken a leading role in the streets; it had also been the case in the “Revolution on the granite” of 1990 and the Orange Revolution of 2004. Successive generations – some of them young people already born in an independent Ukraine – have seemed to mature on the basis of crises and protests.

Two years after the protests of the Euromaidan, the role played by the young as agents of political and social change appears to demand much more than going out into the streets. “The young have a great potential to mould the history of a state, but persistence and hard work are needed from the new generations to achieve a real democracy”, as the sociologist Oleksandra Senchuk puts it. Demands for improvements in the quality of education, for a higher level of development of civil society, for greater participation in political and economic structures in order to establish better practices and for progress in the fields of equality and tolerance are going to be, among many others, the new battlefields for Ukrainian youth. Are the young prepared for such challenges?

The (uncomfortable) relationship with politics

Ukrainian youth have acted as the driving force for the principal protests of the last few decades, but it has not been at all easy for these generations to channel this presence in the streets in terms of gaining political power.

The reasons that are concealed behind this incapacity to win power may be related in
part to the very nature of the Ukrainian state, in which “the oligarchs and financial groups who fund Ukraine’s political parties have agendas of their own that do not usually include taking a chance … with the programmes of the next generation”, in the analysis of the expert Nadia Diuk. Another factor, also inherent in the political system, is the intense centralization of the state, which greatly complicates mobility for young leaders, limiting their options of beginning political work at a local or regional level before emerging onto the national stage. At the same time, another influence could also be the perception the young have of politics, or the image of it that has been inculcated into them. “The idea has been transmitted to the young from the higher circles of power that politics is something dirty and that it’s better to keep out of it, people say that you should work for the country, but not in the first rank of politics”, explains Sergiy Mytrofanskyi, former Deputy Minister for Youth and Sport, to esglobal. In effect, surveys reveal that the level of confidence in political institutions among Ukrainians is low, with the exception of the army, which enjoys a good reputation. These negative attitudes towards the institutions of the state are also visible among the young – citizens aged from 14 to 35, approximately 32 per cent of the total population – according to opinion surveys carried out in recent years.

Euromaidan: What did it mean?

The “Revolution of Dignity” represented a turning point for a part of Ukrainian youth. “For me it was very important to join Euromaidan SOS [an initiative created by young people that began as a response to police repression of the protests], at the time I was just a student, and I thought, if it isn’t me who does something, who will?”, recounts Mariia Lysenko (23), a human rights activist. The idea that politics is something bad and that it’s best not to get involved in it may be changing, little by little. “Today people have begun to understand that politics is not something that someone has a monopoly over, it’s everything that has a relation to public opinion, an instrument for changing things”, claims Oleksandra Romantsova (30), who works for the Center for Civil Liberties.

Since the Revolution new parties have emerged onto the country’s political arena, groups that include young professionals and representatives of civil society. This is the case with the “Self Reliance” or “Self Help” party, which entered the Rada, the Ukrainian Parliament, after the 2014 elections and formed part of the coalition government, until it withdrew in February 2016. New political groupings such as the Democratic Alliance or “Power of People”, which have originated in civil society groups, represent “a new type of political party, but have not had an opportunity to gain visibility or become successful political actors because of the current rules of the political game”, states a recent report, a reference to the manner in which the lack of public financing and transparency result in a situation in which the greater part of the money that sustains political parties comes from oligarchs, who in addition are generally the owners of communications media, which promote the image and visibility of one or another candidate.

These “rules of the game” do not make things at all easy for the younger generations when it comes to operating as real political actors, since the old system resists any transformations that could endanger its own survival. Is there any room for hope? Perhaps. “There are parties being created at a regional and local level, they haven’t been around for very long, maybe they won’t even survive, but if they do, they may be able to make the leap forward onto the national stage in the future”, Romantsova asserts. “One
of the main aims now is to create instruments through which the young can have an influence at state level. So that a young person will not just be a consumer of politics but also a creator, as an active participant”, argues Mytrofanskyi, who has been working on the design of the government’s youth policy.

**Civil society in motion**

Since the Revolution of Dignity, the annexation of Crimea and the war that resulted from the separatist insurgency in the east of the country, Ukrainian society has witnessed a significant increase in activism. New platforms, coalitions and associations have been created to oppose corruption and for the defence of civil liberties. Some that already existed previously have centred their work on the urgent needs of the moment, as for example in the provision of aid for internal refugees. “There are things that we as citizens are doing because the state does not, such as documenting the situation of human rights in the east of the country”, explains Mariia Lysenko, who has travelled to the region to carry out work as a volunteer.

Civic activity has also made steps forward in the field of tolerance and equality. Bogdan Globa, director of the Fulcrum Foundation, explained to *esglobal* the ways in which his organization – which has many young people among its members – works to defend the rights of the LGBT community and to secure the establishment of an effective legal framework against discrimination, “creating mechanisms that punish or sanction, for example, companies that discriminate for reasons of gender or sexual orientation”.

As for the participation of youth in civic activity, according to a 2015 study, some 54 per cent of the young had been involved in an initiative of this kind in the previous twelve months, and 36 per cent had worked at some point as volunteers, but only two per cent were members of civic youth organizations. The principal areas of concern that motivated them to join an initiative, according to the same report, were the provision of aid for children in humanitarian crises, the defence of human rights, the improvement of infrastructure in their local areas and the struggle against corruption.

However, the role of the young is not just important as creators or active participants in civil society, but also as the audience for and recipients of campaigns promoting values such as tolerance and equality. In this regard there is work to do: according to another opinion survey, 54 per cent of Ukrainian youth are intolerant of the Roma community, while 45 and 33 per cent respectively would not like to live in the same district as homosexuals or people with HIV-AIDS (the country has one of the highest incidences of HIV in Europe).

One of the greatest challenges will be to see that this boom in citizen action and agitation does not fall away or become diluted with the passage of time. “It’s true that civil society has become more mature, that political participation has increased, but there is also a certain degree of exhaustion, the last two years have been very hard”, Globa points out. Civil society is one of the strongest elements in Ukraine, and could be a great instrument for exerting pressure to demand reforms in areas as important to the young as education and the labour market.

**Kiev, we have a problem: education**
Almost 50 per cent of young people in Ukraine have a university-level qualification, and the educational drop-out rate is insignificant, in large part because secondary education is obligatory and free. If so, then what is wrong with the educational system? First, its poor quality, especially in secondary schools, where teachers receive very low salaries, equivalent to around 120 euros per month. Second, the divergence between urban and rural areas, the latter being home to around 26 per cent of the young people in the country. The percentage of primary and secondary school-age pupils out of school is higher in villages than in cities and the lack of quality is more noticeable: students from rural schools exhibit poorer results year on year, according to the study Education in Ukraine. In the university field, the principal matters to be resolved are the establishment of a better financing model, dealing with the disconnect between education and the labour market, and the question of how to encourage an entrepreneurial, business-oriented spirit, taking maximum advantage of the innovative potential that youth represents.

Possible solutions? For a start, suggests Yegor Stadny, director of the think tank CEDOS, a better distribution of funds and higher salaries for teachers, and a requirement for a higher level of training, “The country is experiencing a declining birth rate, there will be fewer young people, so this is the time to carry out reforms”, he asserts, although, he also adds that “for all this to be done, the country’s economy needs to be reorientated”. Due to its economic decline in 2014, Ukrainian education spending underwent the steepest decline in Europe, education being the field, together with health, that has suffered the most severe cuts in recent years.

**Work, expectations, and a “brain drain”?**

After education and studying comes the great challenge: entering the labour market. In the case of Ukraine, the level of unemployment, between 15 and 17 per cent, is not as shocking as in other parts of Europe (such as Greece or Spain, with around 50 and 44 per cent youth unemployment respectively). However, although the level of unemployment is not alarming, and though temporary contracts are relatively uncommon, around half of Ukrainian youth do not work in jobs that correspond to their education and training, and there is a great deal of informal employment, together with little enforcement of workplace rights and, in general, very low wages (an average of around 150 euros per month). The majority of young Ukrainians (around 80 per cent) overwhelmingly prefer to seek employment in the private sector, where they think they will have a better chance of a higher salary and more opportunities to develop their career. Even so, the available surveys do not present us with very positive figures regarding the relationship between expectations and reality in material terms: only eight per cent of the young say they live comfortably, and only one per cent that they have reached a desirable financial status.

Experts agree that it would be useful to analyse current tendencies in order to adapt academic education better to the labour market, offer assistance so that young people can choose a professional career more rigorously and provide more education in the business field. As Mytrofanskyi points out, “close to 38 per cent of young people would like to set up their own business”. Is the public sector not attractive at all? “There are people who are also interested in the public sector, who want to change things, even with the low salaries, but it would maybe be helpful to raise the pay to provide more motivation” says Oleksandr Ustymenko, a recent economics graduate and representative
of the European Youth Parliament in Ukraine.

In this context, the possibility exists that earlier investment in education and the talents of the most recent generations may be squandered, and equally that dissatisfaction at work may lead to low levels of productivity. Another great risk is that young people who are better educated – graduates or with post-graduate studies – may leave the country in search of better opportunities abroad. Ukraine has a long history of migration, and there are substantial Ukrainian diasporas in several parts of the world. In 2014, some 33,000 young Ukrainians were living in the European Union, studying or undertaking some form of training. Can one speak of a brain drain? “It depends where they go. If they study in Poland, for example, where it’s easier to get a diploma, they normally come back to Ukraine. If the destination is Germany, there is a greater possibility that they will go on to study and stay there.”, claims Stadny. The majority of young people do not want to emigrate, but today the unstable economic situation, the conflict in the south-east of the country and the search for a higher standard of living are the principal motivations when it comes to packing one’s bags, and will probably continue to be so in the future.

Youth and conflict

A particular challenge is represented by the situation in southeast Ukraine, still at war after the rising by militias in the oblasts of Donetsk and Lugansk, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the launching of an “anti-terrorist operation” against the rebels by Kiev. Two years later the conflict continues without a settlement, and has generated a massive flight of people: nearly 1.6 million internally displaced persons, and a little over a million Ukrainians who have fled to neighbouring countries, principally Russia, according to the UN. Half of those internally displaced are young people, between 16 and 35 years old. “There are not many young people left in the southeast of the country, the main hope now is that the war ends, that there might be a possibility of making plans for the future”, explains Anna Morgunova (23), from Lugansk.

The impact of the conflict has also been noticeable in military service. According to official sources there has been an increase in desertion, of around 30 per cent, by young men aged between 20 and 27 called up to join the army. In addition, in 2015 the war took over first place in the list of issues that were of most concern to the young, ahead of economic problems and corruption.

Within the self-proclaimed Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk, the majority of people continue to think that the protests of the Euromaidan were a coup d’état, and do not perceive Russia as an aggressor. Are young people in these regions different from those in the rest of the country? “The mentality that you are a small piece in a big machine is more characteristic of the southeast, while in the rest of the country we are more conscious that we are responsible for ourselves”, claims Romantsova, although she also believes that young people in central and western Ukraine are more open-minded, “more connected to Europe, thanks to the Internet and social networks”, while the young people who have taken up arms “are looking above all for a feeling of power”. For his part, Ustymenko believes that in general both sides share the same values and that in the end “what we all want is peace”.

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There may not perhaps be great differences in terms of the life priorities of young people (education, work and the possibility of creating families of their own), but the populations in these different areas, including the youngest among them, may indeed differ with regard to their ideas on national construction, moulded by a history that has made some regions closer to Russia and others to Europe. There is also the socio-economic factor, the division between rural and industrial environments, in other words between an eastern Ukraine with greater economic resources industrialized under Russian influence and more rural regions that see greater advantages in a future closer to Europe, as the political scientist Ruth Ferrero has indicated.

Time will tell if it is possible for these regions to be reintegrated into the Ukrainian state, if there is room for a future reconciliation or whether, on the contrary, further generations in this divided Ukraine will move further and further apart, entrenched in exclusive nationalisms.

**The responsibility of leading the future**

Ukrainian youth face a future in which they will have to confront intangible enemies such as exhaustion and frustration, especially if the desired reforms, economic stability and an end to the conflict, are not achieved in the short to medium term, and if the country’s great stumbling block, corruption, continues its course unhindered. The young bear a great weight of expection: to become the future political and economic elite, to improve living standards without renouncing civil liberties, to help their elders to adapt to change... The responsibility is overwhelming.

The new generation of Ukrainians is educated, digital, more connected to the world and with many more rights than their parents or grandparents enjoyed. They know this. They are also aware that this is a crucial moment for their country: they have the sense that reforms are on the way, that a window of opportunity has been opened. Will they be able to take advantage of it?

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