

A revealing commentary by a German newspaper

The price of Ukrainian democracy

Peter Schwarz
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“Triumph for democracy” was the title of a recent commentary in the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper dealing with the results of the Ukrainian presidential elections. The author of the piece, Thomas Urban, is the newspaper’s European specialist. For weeks he has been describing the Orange opposition in Kiev in glowing and uncritical reports. But in his recent comment, written in a flush of enthusiasm, he says more about the character of Ukrainian democracy than perhaps he intended.

Urban writes: “One thing that Yushchenko will surely not be able to carry out: to quickly break the monopolies of the industrial oligarchs. He will have to proceed carefully, but the chances of merging them in the medium term into a free-market economy are not so bad. After all, the oligarchs who scrambled together fortunes in the ’90s, partially with criminal methods, are themselves interested in legal security—and in prestige. They also want to be recognised internationally as part of the Ukrainian elite.... The wild mafia capitalism wants to provide itself with an air of respectability—and this fits quite well into the program for the democratisation of the country. The fact that most oligarchs, should they become good taxpayers, will get off lightly—because it is hardly possible to prove their criminal activity—will be a price that has to be paid for a new start.”

This, therefore, is Ukrainian democracy: legal security for the oligarchs who assembled their fortunes with criminal methods, and an air of respectability for wild mafia capitalism. For once, we agree with Urban. This is, in fact, the direction being taken by the democracy of Viktor Yushchenko and Julia Timoschenko.

Democracy means popular rule. Genuine democracy presupposes that broad layers of the population can

satisfy their elementary interests not only in a formal sense but in real life. The observance of certain formalities in the course of casting votes (the observance of which was also very doubtful during the last repeated election) is not sufficient to satisfy the demands of genuine democracy. As long as social wealth is controlled by a tiny, fabulously rich upper layer, while the vast majority must get by with a monthly income of between 30 and 100 euros, there can be no real democracy.

The incompatibility of democracy and social inequality has been evident all over the world for the past 20 years—not least in the US, where a causal connection exists between the social polarisation of society and the attacks on basic democratic rights undertaken by the Bush administration. Elections have been transformed into an industry swallowing billions of dollars aimed at systematically manipulating public opinion and excluding mention of any serious opposition to the dominant elite. Freedom of the press has degenerated into freedom for financially powerful companies to possess and control the media as they desire. In fact, the crude methods used by the Ukrainian government to manipulate its media appear positively primitive compared to the media power of a Rupert Murdoch or a Silvio Berlusconi.

The first condition for the introduction of democratic relations worthy of the name is precisely what Urban categorically rules out. It would consist of breaking the monopolies of the industrial and finance oligarchs. In addition, the illegitimately acquired fortunes would have to be confiscated and made available for social purposes—old-age pensions, education, health care, securing jobs and the development of the country’s infrastructure. Such a perspective would overcome the gap between the east and the west of the country, which

threatens to rapidly tear Ukraine apart, by openly exposing the real social contradictions—the contrast between the nouveau riche elite and the mass of the population.

This is the last thing the so-called democratic opposition wants. The Yushchenko camp would be sawing at the branch on which it sits. Irrespective of all its pompous demagoguery, the so-called Orange revolution has transformed nothing. It has merely replaced one clique of the propertied elite by another. As Urban correctly notes, this is the reason it cannot afford to break the monopolies of the industrial oligarchs.

Yushchenko will be unable to maintain his democratic claims for long. His collaborator Julia Timoshenko is already loudly demanding that presidential powers formerly violently opposed by the opposition should now be retained. The only reason, however, why Yushchenko needs these powers is to follow the example of his predecessor Kuchma: the suppression of all opposition.



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