

“Ukraine Tomorrow”: Domestic oligarchs and western politicians plunder Ukraine

Johannes Stern

7 March 2015

At the invitation of notorious Ukrainian oligarch Dmytro Firtash, several representatives of the European elites met on Tuesday at the luxurious Ferstel palace in Vienna. Under the heading “Ukraine Tomorrow” they planned the economic exploitation of the country, which has been embroiled in civil war since the Western-backed coup last February and stands on the edge of a political and economic abyss. To put it bluntly, the main issue was how Western companies can collaborate with domestic oligarchs to plunder the country.

As always when the imperialists and their local proxies are haggling over the division of the spoils, an attempt was made to package their sinister intentions for public consumption. In the official press release it was stated, “In 200 days, Ukraine will have a master plan for the complex modernisation of the country. The reforms will comprise the following areas: the economy, trade, judiciary, the integration of Ukraine into the EU, the healthcare system, the struggle against corruption, the financial sector and suggestions for a reform of the constitution.”

Among the participants were well-known figures like the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy (BHL) and former French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner. They are now permanent fixtures of proceedings where imperialist plunder is on the agenda under the cover of democracy and “European values.” Both men played an important role in 2011 in the preparation and imposition of NATO’s war on Libya, and, since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, they have been among Russia’s sharpest critics.

Several former leading European politicians are serving as advisers to the “Ukraine Tomorrow” project, all of whom are in search of lucrative sources of income. Former Austrian conservative foreign and finance minister Michael Spindelegger (Austrian People’s Party) is to lead the “Agency for the modernisation of Ukraine.”

Former Polish Prime Minister W?odzimierz Cimoszewicz will be responsible for combatting corruption. He earned his spurs at the roundtable which reintroduced capitalism in Poland and led the country through a drastic austerity and privatisation course in the 1990s to bring it into line with the European Union (EU).

Cimoszewicz sought to convince journalists who were present that despite the project being financed by Firtash and other oligarchs—the main source of corruption in Ukraine—it would not be problematic for his work. “Ultimately they have to do something for their country, otherwise they could lose everything,” he said.

German Social Democratic politician Gunter Verheugen, a former EU commissioner, will oversee the EU association agreement, the centrepiece of which consists of brutal social cuts in a country where GDP per person is currently only half the level of the EU’s poorest state.

British Labour politician, former minister and EU commissioner Baron Mandelson will be responsible for trade issues. Together with the former minister in the German Chancellor’s office, Bodo Hombach, he was jointly responsible for authoring the notorious Schröder-Blair paper, which committed European Social Democracy to a strict neoliberal course at the end of the 1990s.

It is entirely appropriate that former German finance minister and most recent SPD Chancellor candidate Pier Steinbrück will be responsible for finance. Steinbrück’s main concerns during the 2013 election were defending exorbitant salaries for managers, justifying his millions in income from speeches to banks and companies, while calling for higher government salaries.

Steinbrück’s main task will be to raise funds for the Ukraine project. “Without the oligarchs, this will not happen,” he explained to the press, but of course the consultative group was “entirely independent and not

reliant on income from anyone.”

“We are not under the influence of those who have played a role thus far in Ukraine as big industrialists or oligarchs,” Steinbrück asserted.

The money is to flow into a fund for the reconstruction of Ukraine, including projects to be financed by foreign investors, as Spindelegger explained. To put it another way, he will provide back-up to Western firms that wish to exploit the country’s cheap labour.

Dmytro Firtash was unwilling to comment on how much he had invested in the fund. But he noted, “I will invest in my branch of the modernisation programme.” Thus for him, it is also about making a fortune. The oligarch obtained his riches through gas trading with Russia and owns an empire of chemical companies. There are contradictory reports about his wealth, ranging from €700 million to €10 billion. After the change in power in Kiev, he is no longer able to access cheap Russian gas for his firms. Thus for him, a more efficient energy supply is a question of survival.

Another German representative was the jurist and former defence minister Rupert Scholz. In 2006, Scholz demanded that the German army be armed with nuclear weapons in order to “be able to respond appropriately to a nuclear threat from a terror state, meaning in an emergency even with its own nuclear weapons.” It is not known if he repeated this demand in Vienna in connection with the Ukrainian army, whose propaganda claims they are fighting terrorists in eastern Ukraine, backed by nuclear-armed Russia.

Firtash spared no effort or cost to keep his guests entertained. He accommodated them in the luxury Park Hyatt and Ritz-Carlton Vienna hotels. With his initiative, he intends not only to save his own business interests, but his own skin and avoid spending the rest of his life in prison.

It was no accident that Vienna was the location of the meeting. Firtash not only has his headquarters there, he is also unable to leave Austria. A year ago, he was arrested at the request of the American FBI. The reason was a 2013 warrant issued by a US federal district court on charges of bribery and membership in a criminal organisation. He is accused of paying Indian politicians bribes in connection with a titanium project. In the event of extradition, he is threatened with 15 years in prison. Firtash has disputed the charges and described the US proceedings as “politically motivated.”

The Austrian judiciary is not investigating Firtash. A few weeks after his detention, they released him on the

highest bail in the history of the country, €125 million. He is not allowed to leave the country until the extradition request is settled.

Along with Firtash, other Ukrainian oligarchs, who were formerly pro-Russian, are financially supporting “Ukraine Tomorrow”, including Rinat Akhmetov, who, according to the latest Forbes list, is the richest Ukrainian, with wealth of \$6.7 billion, and Victor Pintchuk, the son-in-law of former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma.

The Western politicians now working under the wing of Firtash have made no secret of who their new employer is. “Mr. Firtash is of course a Ukrainian oligarch. I have absolutely no problem saying that word,” Steinbrück told *Handelsblatt*. “When the suggestion comes from the employer—along with the trade union organisations—to provide an injection of finance for this worthwhile agency, this is positive. The billionaires are thus using a portion of their wealth to modernise their country. I can’t criticise them for that and exclude them as undesirables.”

Steinbrück’s statement is a devastating indictment not only of his own activities, but also of the West’s policy as a whole. Politicians and the media are spreading official propaganda that a democratic transition, or even revolution, has taken place in Ukraine against the oligarchs. Now, a leading German politician is proudly proclaiming the oligarchs to be the motor for the “modernisation” of the country who should not be “criticised.”

The coup in Kiev, planned and financed by the US and EU, never pursued the goals of establishing so-called Western values and overcoming the dominance of the oligarchs. The Western powers were much more concerned with installing a puppet regime and bringing the oligarchs, who had close ties with Russia, on to their side so as to organise the exploitation of the country’s raw materials and cheap labour by Western companies. These are the goals of the “Ukraine Tomorrow” project.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact